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JORDAN B. PETERSON

12 RULES FOR LIFE

AN ANTIDOTE TO CHAOS

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NEW YORK TIMES

Jordan B. Peterson

12 RULES FOR LIFE

An Antidote for Chaos

Foreword by Norman Doidge
Illustrations by Ethan Van Scriver

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Foreword

Rules? More rules? Really? Isn't life complicated enough, restricting enough, without abstract rules that don't take our unique, individual situations into account? And given that our brains are plastic, and all develop differently based on our life experiences, why even expect that a few rules might be helpful to us all?

People don't clamour for rules, even in the Bible … as when Moses comes down the mountain, after a long absence, bearing the tablets inscribed with ten commandments, and finds the Children of Israel in revelry. They'd been Pharaoh's slaves and subject to his tyrannical regulations for four hundred years, and after that Moses subjected them to the harsh desert wilderness for another forty years, to purify them of their slavishness. Now, free at last, they are unbridled, and have lost all control as they dance wildly around an idol, a golden calf, displaying all manner of corporeal corruption.

"I've got some good news … and I've got some bad news," the lawgiver yells to them. "Which do you want first?"

"The good news!" the hedonists reply.

"I got Him from fifteen commandments down to ten!"

"Hallelujah!" cries the unruly crowd. "And the bad?"

"Adultery is still in."

So rules there will be—but, please, not too many. We are ambivalent about rules, even when we know they are good for us. If we are spirited souls, if we have character, rules seem restrictive, an affront to our sense of agency and our pride in working out our own lives. Why should we be judged according to another's rule?

And judged we are. After all, God didn't give Moses "The Ten Suggestions," he gave Commandments; and if I'm a free agent, my first reaction to a command might just be that nobody, not even God, tells me what to do, even if it's good for me. But the story of the golden calf also

reminds us that without rules we quickly become slaves to our passions—and there's nothing freeing about that.

And the story suggests something more: unchaperoned, and left to our own untutored judgment, we are quick to aim low and worship qualities that are beneath us—in this case, an artificial animal that brings out our own animal instincts in a completely unregulated way. The old Hebrew story makes it clear how the ancients felt about our prospects for civilized behaviour in the absence of rules that seek to elevate our gaze and raise our standards.

One neat thing about the Bible story is that it doesn't simply list its rules, as lawyers or legislators or administrators might; it embeds them in a dramatic tale that illustrates why we need them, thereby making them easier to understand. Similarly, in this book Professor Peterson doesn't just propose his twelve rules, he tells stories, too, bringing to bear his knowledge of many fields as he illustrates and explains why the best rules do not ultimately restrict us but instead facilitate our goals and make for fuller, freer lives.

The first time I met Jordan Peterson was on September 12, 2004, at the home of two mutual friends, TV producer Wodek Szemberg and medical internist Estera Bekier. It was Wodek's birthday party. Wodek and Estera are Polish émigrés who grew up within the Soviet empire, where it was understood that many topics were off limits, and that casually questioning certain social arrangements and philosophical ideas (not to mention the regime itself) could mean big trouble.

But now, host and hostess luxuriated in easygoing, honest talk, by having elegant parties devoted to the pleasure of saying what you *really* thought and hearing others do the same, in an uninhibited give-and-take. Here, the rule was "Speak your mind." If the conversation turned to politics, people of different political persuasions spoke to each other—indeed, looked forward to it—in a manner that is increasingly rare. Sometimes Wodek's own opinions, or truths, exploded out of him, as did his laugh. Then he'd hug whoever had made him laugh or provoked him to speak his mind with greater intensity than even he might have intended. This was the best part of the parties, and this frankness, and his warm embraces, made it worth provoking him. Meanwhile, Estera's voice lilted across the room on a very precise path towards its intended listener. Truth explosions didn't make the atmosphere any less easygoing for the company—they made for more truth explosions!—

liberating us, and more laughs, and making the whole evening more pleasant, because with de-repressing Eastern Europeans like the Szemberg-Bekiers, you always knew with what and with whom you were dealing, and that frankness was enlivening. Honoré de Balzac, the novelist, once described the balls and parties in his native France, observing that what appeared to be a single party was always really two. In the first hours, the gathering was suffused with bored people posing and posturing, and attendees who came to meet perhaps one special person who would confirm them in their beauty and status. Then, only in the very late hours, after most of the guests had left, would the second party, the real party, begin. Here the conversation was shared by each person present, and open-hearted laughter replaced the starchy airs. At Estera and Wodek's parties, this kind of wee-hours-of-the-morning disclosure and intimacy often began as soon as we entered the room.

Wodek is a silver-haired, lion-maned hunter, always on the lookout for potential public intellectuals, who knows how to spot people who can *really* talk in front of a TV camera and who look authentic because they are (the camera picks up on that). He often invites such people to these salons. That day Wodek brought a psychology professor, from my own University of Toronto, who fit the bill: intellect and emotion in tandem. Wodek was the first to put Jordan Peterson in front of a camera, and thought of him as a teacher in search of students—because he was always ready to explain. And it helped that he liked the camera and that the camera liked him back.

That afternoon there was a large table set outside in the Szemberg-Bekiers' garden; around it was gathered the usual collection of lips and ears, and loquacious virtuosos. We seemed, however, to be plagued by a buzzing paparazzi of bees, and here was this new fellow at the table, with an Albertan accent, in cowboy boots, who was ignoring them, and kept on talking. He kept talking while the rest of us were playing musical chairs to keep away from the pests, yet also trying to remain at the table because this new addition to our gatherings was so interesting.

He had this odd habit of speaking about the deepest questions to whoever was at this table—most of them new acquaintances—as though he were just making small talk. Or, if he did do small talk, the interval between "How do you know Wodek and Estera?" or "I was a beekeeper once, so I'm used to them" and more serious topics would be nanoseconds.

One might hear such questions discussed at parties where professors and professionals gather, but usually the conversation would remain between two specialists in the topic, off in a corner, or if shared with the whole group it was often not without someone preening. But this Peterson, though erudite, didn't come across as a pedant. He had the enthusiasm of a kid who had just learned something new and had to share it. He seemed to be assuming, as a child would—before learning how dulled adults can become—that if he thought something was interesting, then so might others. There was something boyish in the cowboy, in his broaching of subjects as though we had all grown up together in the same small town, or family, and had all been thinking about the very same problems of human existence all along.

Peterson wasn't really an "eccentric"; he had sufficient conventional chops, had been a Harvard professor, was a gentleman (as cowboys can be) though he did say *damn* and *bloody* a lot, in a rural 1950s sort of way. But everyone listened, with fascination on their faces, because he was in fact addressing questions of concern to everyone at the table.

There was something freeing about being with a person so learned yet speaking in such an unedited way. His thinking was motoric; it seemed he needed to think *aloud*, to use his motor cortex to think, but that motor also had to run fast to work properly. To get to liftoff. Not quite manic, but his idling speed revved high. Spirited thoughts were tumbling out. But unlike many academics who take the floor and hold it, if someone challenged or corrected him he really seemed to *like* it. He didn't rear up and neigh. He'd say, in a kind of folksy way, "Yeah," and bow his head involuntarily, wag it if he had overlooked something, laughing at himself for overgeneralizing. He appreciated being shown another side of an issue, and it became clear that thinking through a problem was, for him, a dialogic process.

One could not but be struck by another unusual thing about him: for an egghead Peterson was extremely practical. His examples were filled with applications to everyday life: business management, how to make furniture (he made much of his own), designing a simple house, making a room beautiful (now an internet meme) or in another, specific case related to education, creating an online writing project that kept minority students from dropping out of school by getting them to do a kind of psychoanalytic exercise on themselves, in which they would free-associate about their past, present and future (now known as the Self-Authoring Program).

I was always especially fond of mid-Western, Prairie types who come from a farm (where they learned all about nature), or from a very small town, and who have worked with their hands to make things, spent long periods outside in the harsh elements, and are often self-educated and go to university against the odds. I found them quite unlike their sophisticated but somewhat denatured urban counterparts, for whom higher education was pre-ordained, and for that reason sometimes taken for granted, or thought of not as an end in itself but simply as a life stage in the service of career advancement. These Westerners were different: self-made, unentitled, hands on, neighbourly and less precious than many of their big-city peers, who increasingly spend their lives indoors, manipulating symbols on computers. This cowboy psychologist seemed to care about a thought only if it might, in some way, be helpful to someone.

We became friends. As a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who loves literature, I was drawn to him because here was a clinician who also had given himself a great books education, and who not only loved soulful Russian novels, philosophy and ancient mythology, but who also seemed to treat them as his most treasured inheritance. But he also did illuminating statistical research on personality and temperament, and had studied neuroscience. Though trained as a behaviourist, he was powerfully drawn to psychoanalysis with its focus on dreams, archetypes, the persistence of childhood conflicts in the adult, and the role of defences and rationalization in everyday life. He was also an outlier in being the only member of the research-oriented Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto who also kept a clinical practice.

On my visits, our conversations began with banter and laughter—that was the small-town Peterson from the Alberta hinterland—his teenage years right out of the movie *FUBAR*—welcoming you into his home. The house had been gutted by Tammy, his wife, and himself, and turned into perhaps the most fascinating and shocking middle-class home I had seen. They had art, some carved masks, and abstract portraits, but they were overwhelmed by a huge collection of original Socialist Realist paintings of Lenin and the early Communists commissioned by the USSR. Not long after the Soviet Union fell, and most of the world breathed a sigh of relief, Peterson began purchasing this propaganda for a song online. Paintings lionizing the Soviet revolutionary spirit completely filled every single wall, the ceilings, even the

bathrooms. The paintings were not there because Jordan had any totalitarian sympathies, but because he wanted to remind himself of something he knew he and everyone would rather forget: that hundreds of millions were murdered in the name of utopia.

It took getting used to, this semi-haunted house "decorated" by a delusion that had practically destroyed mankind. But it was eased by his wonderful and unique spouse, Tammy, who was all in, who embraced and encouraged this unusual need for expression! These paintings provided a visitor with the first window onto the full extent of Jordan's concern about our human capacity for evil in the name of good, and the psychological mystery of self-deception (how can a person deceive himself and get away with it?)—an interest we share. And then there were also the hours we'd spend discussing what I might call a lesser problem (lesser because rarer), the human capacity for evil for the sake of evil, the joy some people take in destroying others, captured famously by the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

And so we'd chat and have our tea in his kitchen-underworld, walled by this odd art collection, a visual marker of his earnest quest to move beyond simplistic ideology, left or right, and not repeat mistakes of the past. After a while, there was nothing peculiar about taking tea in the kitchen, discussing family issues, one's latest reading, with those ominous pictures hovering. It was just living in the world as it was, or in some places, is.

In Jordan's first and only book before this one, *Maps of Meaning,* he shares his profound insights into universal themes of world mythology, and explains how all cultures have created stories to help us grapple with, and ultimately map, the chaos into which we are thrown at birth; this chaos is everything that is unknown to us, and any unexplored territory that we must traverse, be it in the world outside or the psyche within.

Combining evolution, the neuroscience of emotion, some of the best of Jung, some of Freud, much of the great works of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Eliade, Neumann, Piaget, Frye and Frankl, *Maps of Meaning,* published nearly two decades ago, shows Jordan's wide-ranging approach to understanding how human beings and the human brain deal with the archetypal situation that arises whenever we, in our daily lives, must face something we do not understand. The brilliance of the book is in his

demonstration of how rooted this situation is in evolution, our DNA, our brains and our most ancient stories. And he shows that these stories have survived because they still provide guidance in dealing with uncertainty, and the unavoidable unknown.

One of the many virtues of the book you are reading now is that it provides an entry point into *Maps of Meaning,* which is a highly complex work because Jordan was working out his approach to psychology as he wrote it. But it was foundational, because no matter how different our genes or life experiences may be, or how differently our plastic brains are wired by our experience, we all have to deal with the unknown, and we all attempt to move from chaos to order. And this is why many of the rules in this book, being based on *Maps of Meaning,* have an element of universality to them.

Maps of Meaning was sparked by Jordan's agonized awareness, as a teenager growing up in the midst of the Cold War, that much of mankind seemed on the verge of blowing up the planet to defend their various identities. He felt he had to understand how it could be that people would sacrifice everything for an "identity," whatever that was. And he felt he had to understand the ideologies that drove totalitarian regimes to a variant of that same behaviour: killing their own citizens. In *Maps of Meaning*, and again in this book, one of the matters he cautions readers to be most wary of is ideology, no matter who is peddling it or to what end.

Ideologies are simple ideas, disguised as science or philosophy, that purport to explain the complexity of the world and offer remedies that will perfect it. Ideologues are people who pretend they know how to "make the world a better place" before they've taken care of their own chaos within. (The warrior identity that their ideology gives them covers over that chaos.) That's hubris, of course, and one of the most important themes of this book, is "set your house in order" first, and Jordan provides practical advice on how to do this.

Ideologies are substitutes for true knowledge, and ideologues are always dangerous when they come to power, because a simple-minded I-know-it-all approach is no match for the complexity of existence. Furthermore, when their social contraptions fail to fly, ideologues blame not themselves but all who see through the simplifications. Another great U of T professor, Lewis Feuer, in his book *Ideology and the Ideologists*, observed that ideologies

retool the very religious stories they purport to have supplanted, but eliminate the narrative and psychological richness. Communism borrowed from the story of the Children of Israel in Egypt, with an enslaved class, rich persecutors, a leader, like Lenin, who goes abroad, lives among the enslavers, and then leads the enslaved to the promised land (the utopia; the dictatorship of the proletariat).

To understand ideology, Jordan read extensively about not only the Soviet gulag, but also the Holocaust and the rise of Nazism. I had never before met a person, born Christian and of my generation, who was so utterly tormented by what happened in Europe to the Jews, and who had worked so hard to understand how it could have occurred. I too had studied this in depth. My own father survived Auschwitz. My grandmother was middle-aged when she stood face to face with Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi physician who conducted unspeakably cruel experiments on his victims, and she survived Auschwitz by disobeying his order to join the line with the elderly, the grey and the weak, and instead slipping into a line with younger people. She avoided the gas chambers a second time by trading food for hair dye so she wouldn't be murdered for looking too old. My grandfather, her husband, survived the Mauthausen concentration camp, but choked to death on the first piece of solid food he was given, just before liberation day. I relate this, because years after we became friends, when Jordan would take a classical liberal stand for free speech, he would be accused by left-wing extremists as being a right-wing bigot.

Let me say, with all the moderation I can summon: *at best*, those accusers have simply not done their due diligence. I have; with a family history such as mine, one develops not only radar, but underwater sonar for right-wing bigotry; but even more important, one learns to recognize the kind of person with the comprehension, tools, good will and courage to combat it, and Jordan Peterson is *that* person.

My own dissatisfaction with modern political science's attempts to understand the rise of Nazism, totalitarianism and prejudice was a major factor in my decision to supplement my studies of political science with the study of the unconscious, projection, psychoanalysis, the regressive potential of group psychology, psychiatry and the brain. Jordan switched out of political science for similar reasons. With these important parallel interests,

we didn't always agree on "the answers" (thank God), but we almost always agreed on the questions.

Our friendship wasn't all doom and gloom. I have made a habit of attending my fellow professors' classes at our university, and so attended his, which were always packed, and I saw what now millions have seen online: a brilliant, often dazzling public speaker who was at his best riffing like a jazz artist; at times he resembled an ardent Prairie preacher (not in evangelizing, but in his passion, in his ability to tell stories that convey the life-stakes that go with believing or disbelieving various ideas). Then he'd just as easily switch to do a breathtakingly systematic summary of a series of scientific studies. He was a master at helping students become more reflective, and take themselves and their futures seriously. He taught them to respect many of the greatest books ever written. He gave vivid examples from clinical practice, was (appropriately) self-revealing, even of his own vulnerabilities, and made fascinating links between evolution, the brain and religious stories. In a world where students are taught to see evolution and religion as simply opposed (by thinkers like Richard Dawkins), Jordan showed his students how evolution, of all things, helps to explain the profound psychological appeal and wisdom of many ancient stories, from Gilgamesh to the life of the Buddha, Egyptian mythology and the Bible. He showed, for instance, how stories about journeying voluntarily into the unknown—the hero's quest—mirror universal tasks for which the brain evolved. He respected the stories, was not reductionist, and never claimed to exhaust their wisdom. If he discussed a topic such as prejudice, or its emotional relatives fear and disgust, or the differences between the sexes on average, he was able to show how these traits evolved and why they survived.

Above all, he alerted his students to topics rarely discussed in university, such as the simple fact that all the ancients, from Buddha to the biblical authors, knew what every slightly worn-out adult knows, that life is suffering. If you are suffering, or someone close to you is, that's sad. But alas, it's not particularly special. We don't suffer only because "politicians are dimwitted," or "the system is corrupt," or because you and I, like almost everyone else, can *legitimately* describe ourselves, in some way, as a victim of something or someone. It is because we are born human that we are guaranteed a good dose of suffering. And chances are, if you or someone you love is not suffering now, they will be within five years, unless you are

freakishly lucky. Rearing kids is hard, work is hard, aging, sickness and death are hard, and Jordan emphasized that doing all that totally on your own, without the benefit of a loving relationship, or wisdom, or the psychological insights of the greatest psychologists, only makes it harder. He wasn't scaring the students; in fact, they found this frank talk reassuring, because in the depths of their psyches, most of them knew what he said was true, even if there was never a forum to discuss it—perhaps because the adults in their lives had become so naively overprotective that they deluded themselves into thinking that not talking about suffering would in some way magically protect their children from it.

Here he would relate the myth of the hero, a cross-cultural theme explored psychoanalytically by Otto Rank, who noted, following Freud, that hero myths are similar in many cultures, a theme that was picked up by Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Erich Neumann, among others. Where Freud made great contributions in explaining neuroses by, among other things, focusing on understanding what we might call a failed-hero story (that of Oedipus), Jordan focused on triumphant heroes. In all these triumph stories, the hero has to go into the unknown, into an unexplored territory, and deal with a new great challenge and take great risks. In the process, something of himself has to die, or be given up, so he can be reborn and meet the challenge. This requires courage, something rarely discussed in a psychology class or textbook. During his recent public stand for free speech and against what I call "forced speech" (because it involves a government forcing citizens to voice political views), the stakes were very high; he had much to lose, and knew it. Nonetheless, I saw him (and Tammy, for that matter) not only display such courage, but also continue to live by many of the rules in this book, some of which can be very demanding.

I saw him grow, from the remarkable person he was, into someone even more able and assured—through living by these rules. In fact, it was the process of writing this book, and developing these rules, that led him to take the stand he did against forced or compelled speech. And that is why, during those events, he started posting some of his thoughts about life and these rules on the internet. Now, over 100 million YouTube hits later, we know they have struck a chord.

Given our distaste for rules, how do we explain the extraordinary response to his lectures, which give rules? In Jordan's case, it was of course his charisma and a rare willingness to stand for a principle that got him a wide hearing online initially; views of his first YouTube statements quickly numbered in the hundreds of thousands. But people have kept listening because what he is saying meets a deep and unarticulated need. And that is because alongside our wish to be free of rules, we all search for structure.

The hunger among many younger people for rules, or at least guidelines, is greater today for good reason. In the West at least, millennials are living through a unique historical situation. They are, I believe, the first generation to have been so thoroughly taught two seemingly contradictory ideas about morality, simultaneously—at their schools, colleges and universities, by many in my own generation. This contradiction has left them at times disoriented and uncertain, without guidance and, more tragically, deprived of riches they don't even know exist.

The first idea or teaching is that morality is relative, at best a personal "value judgment." *Relative* means that there is no absolute right or wrong in anything; instead, morality and the rules associated with it are just a matter of personal opinion or happenstance, "relative to" or "related to" a particular framework, such as one's ethnicity, one's upbringing, or the culture or historical moment one is born into. It's nothing but an accident of birth. According to this argument (now a creed), history teaches that religions, tribes, nations and ethnic groups tend to disagree about fundamental matters, and always have. Today, the postmodernist left makes the additional claim that one group's morality is *nothing but* its attempt to exercise power over another group. So, the decent thing to do—once it becomes apparent how arbitrary your, and your society's, "moral values" are—is to show tolerance for people who think differently, and who come from different (diverse) backgrounds. That emphasis on tolerance is so paramount that for many people one of the worst character flaws a person can have is to be "judgmental."[fn1] And, since we don't know right from wrong, or what is good, just about *the most inappropriate thing an adult can do is give a young person advice* about how to live.

And so a generation has been raised untutored in what was once called, aptly, "practical wisdom," which guided previous generations. Millennials,

often told they have received the finest education available anywhere, have actually suffered a form of serious intellectual and moral neglect. The relativists of my generation and Jordan's, many of whom became their professors, chose to devalue thousands of years of human knowledge about how to acquire virtue, dismissing it as passé, "not relevant" or even "oppressive." They were so successful at it that the very word "virtue" sounds out of date, and someone using it appears anachronistically moralistic and self-righteous.

The study of virtue is not quite the same as the study of morals (right and wrong, good and evil). Aristotle defined the virtues simply as the ways of behaving that are most conducive to happiness in life. Vice was defined as the ways of behaving least conducive to happiness. He observed that the virtues always aim for balance and avoid the extremes of the vices. Aristotle studied the virtues and the vices in his *Nicomachean Ethics.* It was a book based on experience and observation, not conjecture, about the kind of happiness that was possible for human beings. Cultivating *judgment* about the difference between virtue and vice is the beginning of wisdom, something that can never be out of date.

By contrast, our modern relativism begins by asserting that making judgments about how to live is impossible, because there is no *real* good, and no *true* virtue (as these too are relative). Thus relativism's closest approximation to "virtue" is "tolerance." Only tolerance will provide social cohesion between different groups, and save us from harming each other. On Facebook and other forms of social media, therefore, you signal your so-called virtue, telling everyone how tolerant, open and compassionate you are, and wait for likes to accumulate. (Leave aside that telling people you're virtuous isn't a virtue, it's self-promotion. Virtue signalling is not virtue. Virtue signalling is, quite possibly, our commonest vice.)

Intolerance of others' views (no matter how ignorant or incoherent they may be) is not simply wrong; in a world where there is no right or wrong, it is worse: it is a sign you are embarrassingly unsophisticated or, possibly, dangerous.

But it turns out that many people cannot tolerate the vacuum—the chaos—which is inherent in life, but made worse by this moral relativism; they cannot live without a moral compass, without an ideal at which to aim in their lives. (For relativists, ideals are values too, and like all values, they are

merely “relative” and hardly worth sacrificing for.) So, right alongside relativism, we find the spread of nihilism and despair, and also the opposite of moral relativism: the blind certainty offered by ideologies that claim to have an answer for everything.

And so we arrive at the second teaching that millennials have been bombarded with. They sign up for a humanities course, to study greatest books ever written. But they’re not assigned the books; instead they are given ideological attacks on them, based on some appalling simplification. Where the relativist is filled with uncertainty, the ideologue is the very opposite. He or she is hyper-judgmental and censorious, always knows what’s wrong about others, and what to do about it. Sometimes it seems the only people willing to give advice in a relativistic society are those with the least to offer.

Modern moral relativism has many sources. As we in the West learned more history, we understood that different epochs had different moral codes. As we travelled the seas and explored the globe, we learned of far-flung tribes on different continents whose different moral codes made sense relative to, or within the framework of, their societies. Science played a role, too, by attacking the religious view of the world, and thus undermining the religious grounds for ethics and rules. Materialist social science implied that we could divide the world into facts (which all could observe, and were objective and “real”) and values (which were subjective and personal). Then we could first agree on the facts, and, maybe, one day, develop a scientific code of ethics (which has yet to arrive). Moreover, by implying that values had a lesser reality than facts, science contributed in yet another way to moral relativism, for it treated “value” as secondary. (But the idea that we can easily separate facts and values was and remains naive; to some extent, one’s values determine what one will pay attention to, and what will count as a fact.)

The idea that different societies had different rules and morals was known to the ancient world too, and it is interesting to compare its response to this realization with the modern response (relativism, nihilism and ideology). When the ancient Greeks sailed to India and elsewhere, they too discovered that rules, morals and customs differed from place to place, and saw that the explanation for what was right and wrong was often rooted in some ancestral authority. The Greek response was not despair, but a new invention: philosophy.

Socrates, reacting to the uncertainty bred by awareness of these conflicting moral codes, decided that instead of becoming a nihilist, a relativist or an ideologue, he would devote his life to the search for wisdom that could reason about these differences, i.e., he helped invent philosophy. He spent his life asking perplexing, foundational questions, such as “What is virtue?” and “How can one live the good life?” and “What is justice?” and he looked at different approaches, asking which seemed most coherent and most in accord with human nature. These are the kinds of questions that I believe animate this book.

For the ancients, the discovery that different people have different ideas about how, practically, to live, did not paralyze them; it deepened their understanding of humanity and led to some of the most satisfying conversations human beings have ever had, about how life might be lived.

Likewise, Aristotle. Instead of despairing about these differences in moral codes, Aristotle argued that though specific rules, laws and customs differed from place to place, what does not differ is that in all places human beings, by their nature, have a proclivity to make rules, laws and customs. To put this in modern terms, it seems that all human beings are, by some kind of biological endowment, so ineradicably concerned with morality that we create a structure of laws and rules wherever we are. The idea that human life can be free of moral concerns is a fantasy.

We are rule generators. And given that we are moral animals, what must be the effect of our simplistic modern relativism upon us? It means we are hobbling ourselves by pretending to be something we are not. It is a mask, but a strange one, for it mostly deceives the one who wears it. *Scccccratccch* the most clever postmodern-relativist professor’s Mercedes with a key, and you will see how fast the mask of relativism (with its pretense that there can be neither right nor wrong) and the cloak of radical tolerance come off.

Because we do not yet have an ethics based on modern science, Jordan is not trying to develop his rules by wiping the slate clean—by dismissing thousands of years of wisdom as mere superstition and ignoring our greatest moral achievements. Far better to integrate the best of what we are now learning with the books human beings saw fit to preserve over millennia, and with the stories that have survived, against all odds, time’s tendency to obliterate.

He is doing what reasonable guides have always done: he makes no claim

that human wisdom begins with himself, but, rather, turns first to his own guides. And although the topics in this book are serious, Jordan often has great fun addressing them with a light touch, as the chapter headings convey. He makes no claim to be exhaustive, and sometimes the chapters consist of wide-ranging discussions of our psychology as he understands it.

So why not call this a book of “guidelines,” a far more relaxed, user-friendly and less rigid sounding term than “rules”?

Because these really are rules. And the foremost rule is that you must take responsibility for your own life. Period.

One might think that a generation that has heard endlessly, from their more ideological teachers, about the rights, rights, rights that belong to them, would object to being told that they would do better to focus instead on taking responsibility. Yet this generation, many of whom were raised in small families by hyper-protective parents, on soft-surface playgrounds, and then taught in universities with “safe spaces” where they don’t have to hear things they don’t want to—schooled to be risk-averse—has among it, now, millions who feel stultified by this underestimation of their potential resilience and who have embraced Jordan’s message that each individual has ultimate responsibility to bear; that if one wants to live a full life, one first sets one’s own house in order; and only then can one sensibly aim to take on bigger responsibilities. The extent of this reaction has often moved both of us to the brink of tears.

Sometimes these rules are demanding. They require you to undertake an incremental process that over time will stretch you to a new limit. That requires, as I’ve said, venturing into the unknown. Stretching yourself beyond the boundaries of your current self requires carefully choosing and then pursuing ideals: ideals that are up there, above you, superior to you—and that you can’t always be sure you will reach.

But if it’s uncertain that our ideals are attainable, why do we bother reaching in the first place? Because if you don’t reach for them, it is certain you will never feel that your life has meaning.

And perhaps because, as unfamiliar and strange as it sounds, in the deepest part of our psyche, we all want to be judged.

Dr. Norman Doidge, MD, is the author
of *The Brain That Changes Itself*

Overture

This book has a short history and a long history. We'll begin with the short history.

In 2012, I started contributing to a website called Quora. On Quora, anyone can ask a question, of any sort—and anyone can answer. Readers upvote those answers they like, and downvote those they don't. In this manner, the most useful answers rise to the top, while the others sink into oblivion. I was curious about the site. I liked its free-for-all nature. The discussion was often compelling, and it was interesting to see the diverse range of opinions generated by the same question.

When I was taking a break (or avoiding work), I often turned to Quora, looking for questions to engage with. I considered, and eventually answered, such questions as "What's the difference between being happy and being content?", "What things get better as you age?" and "What makes life more meaningful?"

Quora tells you how many people have viewed your answer and how many upvotes you received. Thus, you can determine your reach, and see what people think of your ideas. Only a small minority of those who view an answer upvote it. As of July 2017, as I write this—and five years after I addressed "What makes life more meaningful?"—my answer to that question has received a relatively small audience (14,000 views, and 133 upvotes), while my response to the question about aging has been viewed by 7,200 people and received 36 upvotes. Not exactly home runs. However, it's to be expected. On such sites, most answers receive very little attention, while a tiny minority become disproportionately popular.

Soon after, I answered another question: "What are the most valuable things everyone should know?" I wrote a list of rules, or maxims; some dead serious, some tongue-in-cheek—"Be grateful in spite of your suffering," "Do not do things that you hate," "Do not hide things in the fog," and so on. The

Quora readers appeared pleased with this list. They commented on and shared it. They said such things as "I'm definitely printing this list out and keeping it as a reference. Simply phenomenal," and "You win Quora. We can just close the site now." Students at the University of Toronto, where I teach, came up to me and told me how much they liked it. To date, my answer to "What are the most valuable things …" has been viewed by a hundred and twenty thousand people and been upvoted twenty-three hundred times. Only a few hundred of the roughly six hundred thousand questions on Quora have cracked the two-thousand-upvote barrier. My procrastination-induced musings hit a nerve. I had written a 99.9 percentile answer.

It was not obvious to me when I wrote the list of rules for living that it was going to perform so well. I had put a fair bit of care into all the sixty or so answers I submitted in the few months surrounding that post. Nonetheless, Quora provides market research at its finest. The respondents are anonymous. They're disinterested, in the best sense. Their opinions are spontaneous and unbiased. So, I paid attention to the results, and thought about the reasons for that answer's disproportionate success. Perhaps I struck the right balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar while formulating the rules. Perhaps people were drawn to the structure that such rules imply. Perhaps people just like lists.

A few months earlier, in March of 2012, I had received an email from a literary agent. She had heard me speak on CBC radio during a show entitled *Just Say No to Happiness*, where I had criticized the idea that happiness was the proper goal for life. Over the previous decades I had read more than my share of dark books about the twentieth century, focusing particularly on Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great documenter of the slave-labour-camp horrors of the latter, once wrote that the "pitiful ideology" holding that "human beings are created for happiness" was an ideology "done in by the first blow of the work assigner's cudgel."[1] In a crisis, the inevitable suffering that life entails can rapidly make a mockery of the idea that happiness is the proper pursuit of the individual. On the radio show, I suggested, instead, that a deeper meaning was required. I noted that the nature of such meaning was constantly re-presented in the great stories of the past, and that it had more to do with developing character in the face of

suffering than with happiness. This is part of the long history of the present work.

From 1985 until 1999 I worked for about three hours a day on the only other book I have ever published: *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. During that time, and in the years since, I also taught a course on the material in that book, first at Harvard, and now at the University of Toronto. In 2013, observing the rise of YouTube, and because of the popularity of some work I had done with TVO, a Canadian public TV station, I decided to film my university and public lectures and place them online. They attracted an increasingly large audience—more than a million views by April 2016. The number of views has risen very dramatically since then (up to eighteen million as I write this), but that is in part because I became embroiled in a political controversy that drew an inordinate amount of attention.

That's another story. Maybe even another book.

I proposed in *Maps of Meaning* that the great myths and religious stories of the past, particularly those derived from an earlier, oral tradition, were *moral* in their intent, rather than descriptive. Thus, they did not concern themselves with what the world was, as a scientist might have it, but with how a human being should act. I suggested that our ancestors portrayed the world as a stage—a drama—instead of a place of objects. I described how I had come to believe that the constituent elements of the world as drama were order and chaos, and not material things.

Order is where the people around you act according to well-understood social norms, and remain predictable and cooperative. It's the world of social structure, explored territory, and familiarity. The state of Order is typically portrayed, symbolically—imaginatively—as masculine. It's the Wise King and the Tyrant, forever bound together, as society is simultaneously structure and oppression.

Chaos, by contrast, is where—or when—something unexpected happens. Chaos emerges, in trivial form, when you tell a joke at a party with people you think you know and a silent and embarrassing chill falls over the gathering. Chaos is what emerges more catastrophically when you suddenly find yourself without employment, or are betrayed by a lover. As the antithesis of symbolically masculine order, it's presented imaginatively as feminine. It's the new and unpredictable suddenly emerging in the midst of the commonplace familiar. It's Creation and Destruction, the source of new

things and the destination of the dead (as nature, as opposed to culture, is simultaneously birth and demise).

Order and chaos are the yang and yin of the famous Taoist symbol: two serpents, head to tail.[fn1] Order is the white, masculine serpent; Chaos, its black, feminine counterpart. The black dot in the white—and the white in the black—indicate the possibility of transformation: just when things seem secure, the unknown can loom, unexpectedly and large. Conversely, just when everything seems lost, new order can emerge from catastrophe and chaos.

For the Taoists, meaning is to be found on the border between the ever-entwined pair. To walk that border is to stay on the path of life, the divine Way.

And that's much better than happiness.

The literary agent I referred to listened to the CBC radio broadcast where I discussed such issues. It left her asking herself deeper questions. She emailed me, asking if I had considered writing a book for a general audience. I had previously attempted to produce a more accessible version of *Maps of Meaning*, which is a very dense book. But I found that the spirit was neither in me during that attempt nor in the resultant manuscript. I think this was because I was imitating my former self, and my previous book, instead of occupying the place between order and chaos and producing something new. I suggested that she watch four of the lectures I had done for a TVO program called *Big Ideas* on my YouTube channel. I thought if she did that we could have a more informed and thorough discussion about what kind of topics I might address in a more publicly accessible book.

She contacted me a few weeks later, after watching all four lectures and discussing them with a colleague. Her interest had been further heightened, as had her commitment to the project. That was promising—and unexpected. I'm always surprised when people respond positively to what I am saying, given its seriousness and strange nature. I'm amazed I have been allowed (even encouraged) to teach what I taught first in Boston and now in Toronto. I've always thought that if people really noticed what I was teaching there would be Hell to pay. You can decide for yourself what truth there might be in that concern after reading this book. :)

She suggested that I write a guide of sorts to what a person needs “to live well”—whatever that might mean. I thought immediately about my Quora list. I had in the meantime written some further thoughts about of the rules I had posted. People had responded positively toward those new ideas, as well. It seemed to me, therefore, that there might be a nice fit between the Quora list and my new agent’s ideas. So, I sent her the list. She liked it.

At about the same time, a friend and former student of mine—the novelist and screenwriter Gregg Hurwitz—was considering a new book, which would become the bestselling thriller *Orphan X*. He liked the rules, too. He had Mia, the book’s female lead, post a selection of them, one by one, on her fridge, at points in the story where they seemed apropos. That was another piece of evidence supporting my supposition of their attractiveness. I suggested to my agent that I write a brief chapter on each of the rules. She agreed, so I wrote a book proposal suggesting as much. When I started writing the actual chapters, however, they weren’t at all brief. I had much more to say about each rule than I originally envisioned.

This was partly because I had spent a very long time researching my first book: studying history, mythology, neuroscience, psychoanalysis, child psychology, poetry, and large sections of the Bible. I read and perhaps even understood much of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Goethe’s *Faust* and Dante’s *Inferno*. I integrated all of that, for better or worse, trying to address a perplexing problem: the reason or reasons for the nuclear standoff of the Cold War. I couldn’t understand how belief systems could be so important to people that they were willing to risk the destruction of the world to protect them. I came to realize that shared belief systems made people intelligible to one another—and that the systems weren’t just about belief.

People who live by the same code are rendered mutually predictable to one another. They act in keeping with each other’s expectations and desires. They can cooperate. They can even compete peacefully, because everyone knows what to expect from everyone else. A shared belief system, partly psychological, partly acted out, simplifies everyone—in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Shared beliefs simplify the world, as well, because people who know what to expect from one another can act together to tame the world. There is perhaps nothing more important than the maintenance of this organization—this simplification. If it’s threatened, the great ship of state rocks.

It isn't precisely that people will fight for what they believe. They will fight, instead, to maintain *the match between* what they believe, what they expect, and what they desire. They will fight to maintain the match between what they expect and how everyone is acting. It is precisely the maintenance of that match that enables everyone to live together peacefully, predictably and productively. It reduces uncertainty and the chaotic mix of intolerable emotions that uncertainty inevitably produces.

Imagine someone betrayed by a trusted lover. The sacred social contract obtaining between the two has been violated. Actions speak louder than words, and an act of betrayal disrupts the fragile and carefully negotiated peace of an intimate relationship. In the aftermath of disloyalty, people are seized by terrible emotions: disgust, contempt (for self and traitor), guilt, anxiety, rage and dread. Conflict is inevitable, sometimes with deadly results. Shared belief systems—shared systems of agreed-upon conduct and expectation—regulate and control all those powerful forces. It's no wonder that people will fight to protect something that saves them from being possessed by emotions of chaos and terror (and after that from degeneration into strife and combat).

There's more to it, too. A shared cultural system stabilizes human interaction, but is also a system of value—a hierarchy of value, where some things are given priority and importance and others are not. In the absence of such a system of value, people simply cannot act. In fact, they can't even perceive, because both action and perception require a goal, and a valid goal is, by necessity, something valued. We experience much of our positive emotion in relation to goals. We are not happy, technically speaking, unless we see ourselves progressing—and the very idea of progression implies value. Worse yet is the fact that the meaning of life without positive value is not simply neutral. Because we are vulnerable and mortal, pain and anxiety are an integral part of human existence. We must have something to set against the suffering that is intrinsic to Being.[fn2] We must have the meaning inherent in a profound system of value or the horror of existence rapidly becomes paramount. Then, nihilism beckons, with its hopelessness and despair.

So: no value, no meaning. Between value systems, however, there is the possibility of conflict. We are thus eternally caught between the most

diamantine rock and the hardest of places: loss of group-centred belief renders life chaotic, miserable, intolerable; presence of group-centred belief makes conflict with other groups inevitable. In the West, we have been withdrawing from our tradition-, religion- and even nation-centred cultures, partly to decrease the danger of group conflict. But we are increasingly falling prey to the desperation of meaninglessness, and that is no improvement at all.

While writing *Maps of Meaning*, I was (also) driven by the realization that we can no longer afford conflict—certainly not on the scale of the world conflagrations of the twentieth century. Our technologies of destruction have become too powerful. The potential consequences of war are literally apocalyptic. But we cannot simply abandon our systems of value, our beliefs, our cultures, either. I agonized over this apparently intractable problem for months. Was there a third way, invisible to me? I dreamt one night during this period that I was suspended in mid-air, clinging to a chandelier, many stories above the ground, directly under the dome of a massive cathedral. The people on the floor below were distant and tiny. There was a great expanse between me and any wall—and even the peak of the dome itself.

I have learned to pay attention to dreams, not least because of my training as a clinical psychologist. Dreams shed light on the dim places where reason itself has yet to voyage. I have studied Christianity a fair bit, too (more than other religious traditions, although I am always trying to redress this lack). Like others, therefore, I must and do draw more from what I do know than from what I do not. I knew that cathedrals were constructed in the shape of a cross, and that the point under the dome was the centre of the cross. I knew that the cross was simultaneously, the point of greatest suffering, the point of death and transformation, and the symbolic centre of the world. That was not somewhere I wanted to be. I managed to get down, out of the heights—out of the symbolic sky—back to safe, familiar, anonymous ground. I don't know how. Then, still in my dream, I returned to my bedroom and my bed and tried to return to sleep and the peace of unconsciousness. As I relaxed, however, I could feel my body transported. A great wind was dissolving me, preparing to propel me back to the cathedral, to place me once again at that central point. There was no escape. It was a true nightmare. I forced myself awake. The curtains behind me were blowing in over my pillows. Half asleep, I

looked at the foot of the bed. I saw the great cathedral doors. I shook myself completely awake and they disappeared.

My dream placed me at the centre of Being itself, and there was no escape. It took me months to understand what this meant. During this time, I came to a more complete, personal realization of what the great stories of the past continually insist upon: the centre is occupied by the individual. The centre is marked by the cross, as X marks the spot. Existence at that cross is suffering and transformation—and that fact, above all, needs to be voluntarily accepted. It is possible to transcend slavish adherence to the group and its doctrines and, simultaneously, to avoid the pitfalls of its opposite extreme, nihilism. It is possible, instead, to find sufficient meaning in individual consciousness and experience.

How could the world be freed from the terrible dilemma of conflict, on the one hand, and psychological and social dissolution, on the other? The answer was this: through the elevation and development of the individual, and through the willingness of everyone to shoulder the burden of Being and to take the heroic path. We must each adopt as much responsibility as possible for individual life, society and the world. We must each tell the truth and repair what is in disrepair and break down and recreate what is old and outdated. It is in this manner that we can and must reduce the suffering that poisons the world. It's asking a lot. It's asking for everything. But the alternative—the horror of authoritarian belief, the chaos of the collapsed state, the tragic catastrophe of the unbridled natural world, the existential angst and weakness of the purposeless individual—is clearly worse.

I have been thinking and lecturing about such ideas for decades. I have built up a large corpus of stories and concepts pertaining to them. I am not for a moment claiming, however, that I am entirely correct or complete in my thinking. Being is far more complicated than one person can know, and I don't have the whole story. I'm simply offering the best I can manage.

In any case, the consequence of all that previous research and thinking was the new essays which eventually became this book. My initial idea was to write a short essay on all forty of the answers I had provided to Quora. That proposal was accepted by Penguin Random House Canada. While writing, however, I cut the essay number to twenty-five and then to sixteen and then finally, to the current twelve. I've been editing that remainder, with the help

and care of my official editor (and with the vicious and horribly accurate criticism of Hurwitz, mentioned previously) for the past three years.

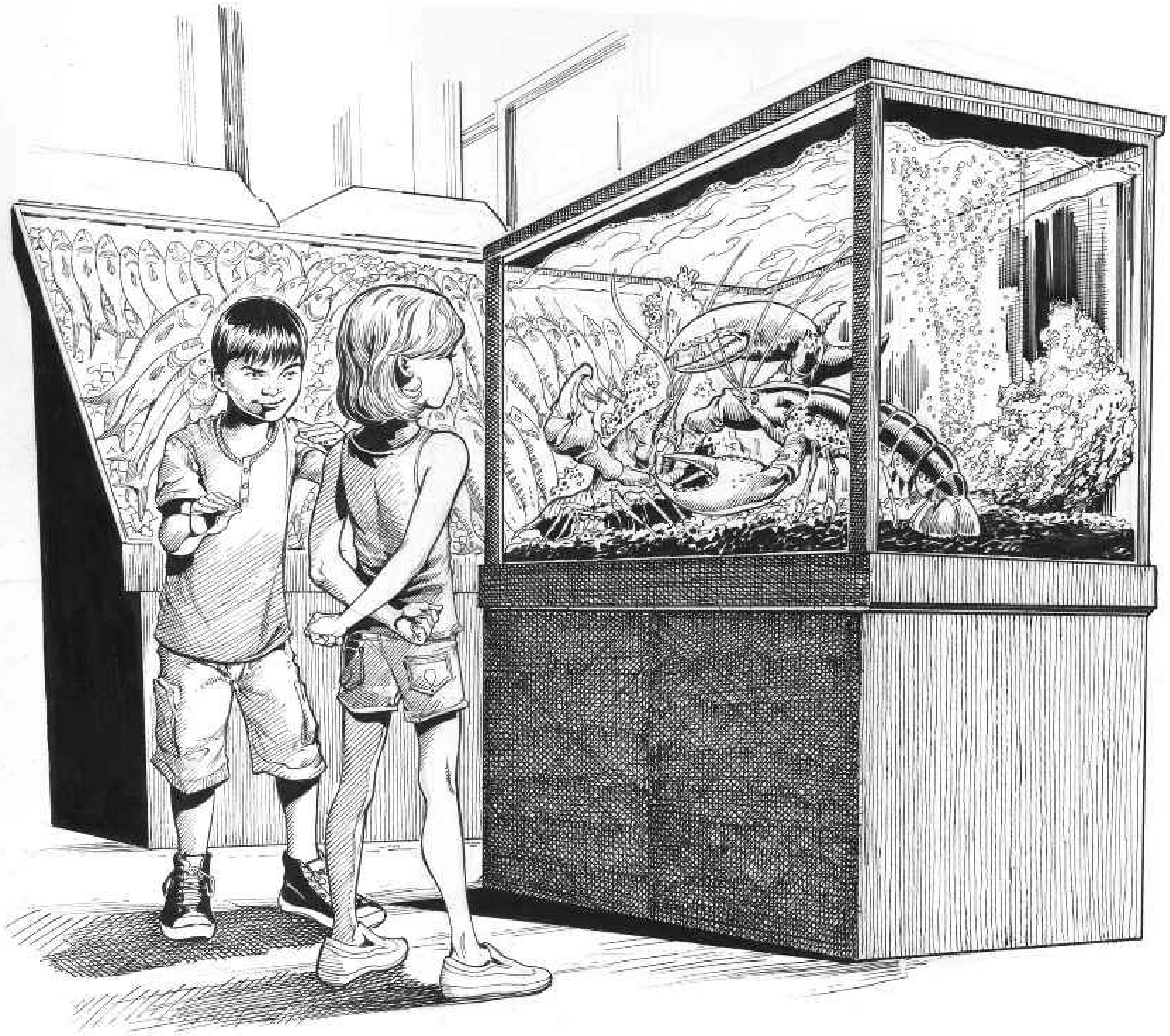
It took a long time to settle on a title: *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Why did that one rise up above all others? First and foremost, because of its simplicity. It indicates clearly that people need ordering principles, and that chaos otherwise beckons. We require rules, standards, values—alone and together. We're pack animals, beasts of burden. We must bear a load, to justify our miserable existence. We require routine and tradition. That's order. Order can become excessive, and that's not good, but chaos can swamp us, so we drown—and that is also not good. We need to stay on the straight and narrow path. Each of the twelve rules of this book—and their accompanying essays—therefore provide a guide to being there. "There" is the dividing line between order and chaos. That's where we are simultaneously stable enough, exploring enough, transforming enough, repairing enough, and cooperating enough. It's there we find the meaning that justifies life and its inevitable suffering. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we would be able to tolerate the weight of our own self-consciousness. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we could withstand the knowledge of our own fragility and mortality, without the sense of aggrieved victimhood that produces, first, resentment, then envy, and then the desire for vengeance and destruction. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we wouldn't have to turn to totalitarian certainty to shield ourselves from the knowledge of our own insufficiency and ignorance. Perhaps we could come to avoid those pathways to Hell—and we have seen in the terrible twentieth century just how real Hell can be.

I hope that these rules and their accompanying essays will help people understand what they already know: that the soul of the individual eternally hungers for the heroism of genuine Being, and that the willingness to take on that responsibility is identical to the decision to live a meaningful life.

If we each live properly, we will collectively flourish.

Best wishes to you all, as you proceed through these pages.

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson
Clinical Psychologist and Professor of Psychology



RULE 1

STAND UP STRAIGHT WITH YOUR SHOULDERS BACK

LOBSTERS—AND TERRITORY

If you are like most people, you don't often think about lobsters[2]—unless you're eating one. However, these interesting and delicious crustaceans are very much worth considering. Their nervous systems are comparatively simple, with large, easily observable neurons, the magic cells of the brain. Because of this, scientists have been able to map the neural circuitry of lobsters very accurately. This has helped us understand the structure and function of the brain and behaviour of more complex animals, including human beings. Lobsters have more in common with you than you might think (particularly when you are feeling crabby—ha ha).

Lobsters live on the ocean floor. They need a home base down there, a range within which they hunt for prey and scavenge around for stray edible bits and pieces of whatever rains down from the continual chaos of carnage and death far above. They want somewhere secure, where the hunting and the gathering is good. They want a home.

This can present a problem, since there are many lobsters. What if two of them occupy the same territory, at the bottom of the ocean, at the same time, and both want to live there? What if there are hundreds of lobsters, all trying to make a living and raise a family, in the same crowded patch of sand and refuse?

Other creatures have this problem, too. When songbirds come north in the spring, for example, they engage in ferocious territorial disputes. The songs they sing, so peaceful and beautiful to human ears, are siren calls and cries of domination. A brilliantly musical bird is a small warrior proclaiming his sovereignty. Take the wren, for example, a small, feisty, insect-eating songbird common in North America. A newly arrived wren wants a sheltered place to build a nest, away from the wind and rain. He wants it close to food,

and attractive to potential mates. He also wants to convince competitors for that space to keep their distance.

Birds—and Territory

My dad and I designed a house for a wren family when I was ten years old. It looked like a Conestoga wagon, and had a front entrance about the size of a quarter. This made it a good house for wrens, who are tiny, and not so good for other, larger birds, who couldn't get in. My elderly neighbour had a birdhouse, too, which we built for her at the same time, from an old rubber boot. It had an opening large enough for a bird the size of a robin. She was looking forward to the day it was occupied.

A wren soon discovered our birdhouse, and made himself at home there. We could hear his lengthy, trilling song, repeated over and over, during the early spring. Once he'd built his nest in the covered wagon, however, our new avian tenant started carrying small sticks to our neighbour's nearby boot. He packed it so full that no other bird, large or small, could possibly get in. Our neighbour was not pleased by this pre-emptive strike, but there was nothing to be done about it. "If we take it down," said my dad, "clean it up, and put it back in the tree, the wren will just pack it full of sticks again." Wrens are small, and they're cute, but they're merciless.

I had broken my leg skiing the previous winter—first time down the hill—and had received some money from a school insurance policy designed to reward unfortunate, clumsy children. I purchased a cassette recorder (a high-tech novelty at the time) with the proceeds. My dad suggested that I sit on the back lawn, record the wren's song, play it back, and watch what happened. So, I went out into the bright spring sunlight and taped a few minutes of the wren laying furious claim to his territory with song. Then I let him hear his own voice. That little bird, one-third the size of a sparrow, began to dive-bomb me and my cassette recorder, swooping back and forth, inches from the speaker. We saw a lot of that sort of behaviour, even in the absence of the tape recorder. If a larger bird ever dared to sit and rest in any of the trees near our birdhouse there was a good chance he would get knocked off his perch by a kamikaze wren.

Now, wrens and lobsters are very different. Lobsters do not fly, sing or perch in trees. Wrens have feathers, not hard shells. Wrens can't breathe

underwater, and are seldom served with butter. However, they are also similar in important ways. Both are obsessed with status and position, for example, like a great many creatures. The Norwegian zoologist and comparative psychologist Thorlief Schjelderup-Ebbe observed (back in 1921) that even common barnyard chickens establish a "pecking order."[3]

The determination of Who's Who in the chicken world has important implications for each individual bird's survival, particularly in times of scarcity. The birds that always have priority access to whatever food is sprinkled out in the yard in the morning are the celebrity chickens. After them come the second-stringers, the hangers-on and wannabes. Then the third-rate chickens have their turn, and so on, down to the bedraggled, partially-feathered and badly-pecked wretches who occupy the lowest, untouchable stratum of the chicken hierarchy.

Chickens, like suburbanites, live communally. Songbirds, such as wrens, do not, but they still inhabit a dominance hierarchy. It's just spread out over more territory. The wiliest, strongest, healthiest and most fortunate birds occupy prime territory, and defend it. Because of this, they are more likely to attract high-quality mates, and to hatch chicks who survive and thrive. Protection from wind, rain and predators, as well as easy access to superior food, makes for a much less stressed existence. Territory matters, and there is little difference between territorial rights and social status. It is often a matter of life and death.

If a contagious avian disease sweeps through a neighbourhood of well-stratified songbirds, it is the least dominant and most stressed birds, occupying the lowest rungs of the bird world, who are most likely to sicken and die.[4] This is equally true of human neighbourhoods, when bird flu viruses and other illnesses sweep across the planet. The poor and stressed always die first, and in greater numbers. They are also much more susceptible to non-infectious diseases, such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease. When the aristocracy catches a cold, as it is said, the working class dies of pneumonia.

Because territory matters, and because the best locales are always in short supply, territory-seeking among animals produces conflict. Conflict, in turn, produces another problem: how to win or lose without the disagreeing parties incurring too great a cost. This latter point is particularly important. Imagine that two birds engage in a squabble about a desirable nesting area. The

interaction can easily degenerate into outright physical combat. Under such circumstances, one bird, usually the largest, will eventually win—but even the victor may be hurt by the fight. That means a third bird, an undamaged, canny bystander, can move in, opportunistically, and defeat the now-crippled victor. That is not at all a good deal for the first two birds.

Conflict—and Territory

Over the millennia, animals who must co-habit with others in the same territories have in consequence learned many tricks to establish dominance, while risking the least amount of possible damage. A defeated wolf, for example, will roll over on its back, exposing its throat to the victor, who will not then deign to tear it out. The now-dominant wolf may still require a future hunting partner, after all, even one as pathetic as his now-defeated foe. Bearded dragons, remarkable social lizards, wave their front legs peaceably at one another to indicate their wish for continued social harmony. Dolphins produce specialized sound pulses while hunting and during other times of high excitement to reduce potential conflict among dominant and subordinate group members. Such behavior is endemic in the community of living things.

Lobsters, scuttling around on the ocean floor, are no exception.[5] If you catch a few dozen, and transport them to a new location, you can observe their status-forming rituals and techniques. Each lobster will first begin to explore the new territory, partly to map its details, and partly to find a good place for shelter. Lobsters learn a lot about where they live, and they remember what they learn. If you startle one near its nest, it will quickly zip back and hide there. If you startle it some distance away, however, it will immediately dart towards the nearest suitable shelter, previously identified and now remembered.

A lobster needs a safe hiding place to rest, free from predators and the forces of nature. Furthermore, as lobsters grow, they moult, or shed their shells, which leaves them soft and vulnerable for extended periods of time. A burrow under a rock makes a good lobster home, particularly if it is located where shells and other detritus can be dragged into place to cover the entrance, once the lobster is snugly ensconced inside. However, there may be only a small number of high-quality shelters or hiding places in each new

territory. They are scarce and valuable. Other lobsters continually seek them out.

This means that lobsters often encounter one another when out exploring. Researchers have demonstrated that even a lobster raised in isolation knows what to do when such a thing happens.[6] It has complex defensive and aggressive behaviours built right into its nervous system. It begins to dance around, like a boxer, opening and raising its claws, moving backward, forward, and side to side, mirroring its opponent, waving its opened claws back and forth. At the same time, it employs special jets under its eyes to direct streams of liquid at its opponent. The liquid spray contains a mix of chemicals that tell the other lobster about its size, sex, health, and mood.

Sometimes one lobster can tell immediately from the display of claw size that it is much smaller than its opponent, and will back down without a fight. The chemical information exchanged in the spray can have the same effect, convincing a less healthy or less aggressive lobster to retreat. That's dispute resolution Level 1.[7] If the two lobsters are very close in size and apparent ability, however, or if the exchange of liquid has been insufficiently informative, they will proceed to dispute resolution Level 2. With antennae whipping madly and claws folded downward, one will advance, and the other retreat. Then the defender will advance, and the aggressor retreat. After a couple of rounds of this behaviour, the more nervous of the lobsters may feel that continuing is not in his best interest. He will flick his tail reflexively, dart backwards, and vanish, to try his luck elsewhere. If neither blinks, however, the lobsters move to Level 3, which involves genuine combat.

This time, the now enraged lobsters come at each other viciously, with their claws extended, to grapple. Each tries to flip the other on its back. A successfully flipped lobster will conclude that its opponent is capable of inflicting serious damage. It generally gives up and leaves (although it harbours intense resentment and gossips endlessly about the victor behind its back). If neither can overturn the other—or if one will not quit despite being flipped—the lobsters move to Level 4. Doing so involves extreme risk, and is not something to be engaged in without forethought: one or both lobsters will emerge damaged from the ensuing fray, perhaps fatally.

The animals advance on each other, with increasing speed. Their claws are open, so they can grab a leg, or antenna, or an eye-stalk, or anything else

exposed and vulnerable. Once a body part has been successfully grabbed, the grabber will tail-flick backwards, sharply, with claw clamped firmly shut, and try to tear it off. Disputes that have escalated to this point typically create a clear winner and loser. The loser is unlikely to survive, particularly if he or she remains in the territory occupied by the winner, now a mortal enemy.

In the aftermath of a losing battle, regardless of how aggressively a lobster has behaved, it becomes unwilling to fight further, even against another, previously defeated opponent. A vanquished competitor loses confidence, sometimes for days. Sometimes the defeat can have even more severe consequences. If a dominant lobster is badly defeated, its brain basically dissolves. Then it grows a new, subordinate's brain—one more appropriate to its new, lowly position.[8] Its original brain just isn't sophisticated to manage the transformation from king to bottom dog without virtually complete dissolution and regrowth. Anyone who has experienced a painful transformation after a serious defeat in romance or career may feel some sense of kinship with the once successful crustacean.

The Neurochemistry of Defeat and Victory

A lobster loser's brain chemistry differs importantly from that of a lobster winner. This is reflected in their relative postures. Whether a lobster is confident or cringing depends on the ratio of two chemicals that modulate communication between lobster neurons: serotonin and octopamine. Winning increases the ratio of the former to the latter.

A lobster with high levels of serotonin and low levels of octopamine is a cocky, strutting sort of shellfish, much less likely to back down when challenged. This is because serotonin helps regulate postural flexion. A flexed lobster extends its appendages so that it can look tall and dangerous, like Clint Eastwood in a spaghetti Western. When a lobster that has just lost a battle is exposed to serotonin, it will stretch itself out, advance even on former victors, and fight longer and harder.[9] The drugs prescribed to depressed human beings, which are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, have much the same chemical and behavioural effect. In one of the more staggering demonstrations of the evolutionary continuity of life on Earth, Prozac even cheers up lobsters.[10]

High serotonin/low octopamine characterizes the victor. The opposite

neurochemical configuration, a high ratio of octopamine to serotonin, produces a defeated-looking, scrunched-up, inhibited, drooping, skulking sort of lobster, very likely to hang around street corners, and to vanish at the first hint of trouble. Serotonin and octopamine also regulate the tail-flick reflex, which serves to propel a lobster rapidly backwards when it needs to escape. Less provocation is necessary to trigger that reflex in a defeated lobster. You can see an echo of that in the heightened startle reflex characteristic of the soldier or battered child with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Principle of Unequal Distribution

When a defeated lobster regains its courage and dares to fight again it is more likely to lose again than you would predict, statistically, from a tally of its previous fights. Its victorious opponent, on the other hand, is more likely to win. It's winner-take-all in the lobster world, just as it is in human societies, where the top 1 percent have as much loot as the bottom 50 percent[11]—and where the richest eighty-five people have as much as the bottom three and a half billion.

That same brutal principle of unequal distribution applies outside the financial domain—indeed, anywhere that creative production is required. The majority of scientific papers are published by a very small group of scientists. A tiny proportion of musicians produces almost all the recorded commercial music. Just a handful of authors sell all the books. A million and a half separately titled books (!) sell each year in the US. However, only five hundred of these sell more than a hundred thousand copies.[12] Similarly, just four classical composers (Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky) wrote almost all the music played by modern orchestras. Bach, for his part, composed so prolifically that it would take decades of work merely to hand-copy his scores, yet only a small fraction of this prodigious output is commonly performed. The same thing applies to the output of the other three members of this group of hyper-dominant composers: only a small fraction of their work is still widely played. Thus, a small fraction of the music composed by a small fraction of all the classical composers who have ever composed makes up almost all the classical music that the world knows and loves.

This principle is sometimes known as Price's law, after Derek J. de Solla Price,[13] the researcher who discovered its application in science in 1963. It can be modelled using an approximately L-shaped graph, with number of people on the vertical axis, and productivity or resources on the horizontal. The basic principle had been discovered much earlier. Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), an Italian polymath, noticed its applicability to wealth distribution in the early twentieth century, and it appears true for every society ever studied, regardless of governmental form. It also applies to the population of cities (a very small number have almost all the people), the mass of heavenly bodies (a very small number hoard all the matter), and the frequency of words in a language (90 percent of communication occurs using just 500 words), among many other things. Sometimes it is known as the Matthew Principle (Matthew 25:29), derived from what might be the harshest statement ever attributed to Christ: "to those who have everything, more will be given; from those who have nothing, everything will be taken."

You truly know you are the Son of God when your dicta apply even to crustaceans.

Back to the fractious shellfish: it doesn't take that long before lobsters, testing each other out, learn who can be messed with and who should be given a wide berth—and once they have learned, the resultant hierarchy is exceedingly stable. All a victor needs to do, once he has won, is to wiggle his antennae in a threatening manner, and a previous opponent will vanish in a puff of sand before him. A weaker lobster will quit trying, accept his lowly status, and keep his legs attached to his body. The top lobster, by contrast—occupying the best shelter, getting some good rest, finishing a good meal—parades his dominance around his territory, rousting subordinate lobsters from their shelters at night, just to remind them who's their daddy.

All the Girls

The female lobsters (who also fight hard for territory during the explicitly maternal stages of their existence[14]) identify the top guy quickly, and become irresistibly attracted to him. This is brilliant strategy, in my estimation. It's also one used by females of many different species, including humans. Instead of undertaking the computationally difficult task of identifying the best man, the females outsource the problem to the machine-like calculations

of the dominance hierarchy. They let the males fight it out and peel their paramours from the top. This is very much what happens with stock-market pricing, where the value of any particular enterprise is determined through the competition of all.

When the females are ready to shed their shells and soften up a bit, they become interested in mating. They start hanging around the dominant lobster's pad, spraying attractive scents and aphrodisiacs towards him, trying to seduce him. His aggression has made him successful, so he's likely to react in a dominant, irritable manner. Furthermore, he's large, healthy and powerful. It's no easy task to switch his attention from fighting to mating. (If properly charmed, however, he will change his behaviour towards the female. This is the lobster equivalent of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the fastest-selling paperback of all time, and the eternal Beauty-and-the-Beast plot of archetypal romance. This is the pattern of behaviour continually represented in the sexually explicit literary fantasies that are as popular among women as provocative images of naked women are among men.)

It should be pointed out, however, that sheer physical power is an unstable basis on which to found lasting dominance, as the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal[15] has taken pains to demonstrate. Among the chimp troupes he studied, males who were successful in the longer term had to buttress their physical prowess with more sophisticated attributes. Even the most brutal chimp despot can be taken down, after all, by two opponents, each three-quarters as mean. In consequence, males who stay on top longer are those who form reciprocal coalitions with their lower-status compatriots, and who pay careful attention to the troupe's females and their infants. The political ploy of baby-kissing is literally millions of years old. But lobsters are still comparatively primitive, so the bare plot elements of Beast and Beauty suffice for them.

Once the Beast has been successfully charmed, the successful female (lobster) will disrobe, shedding her shell, making herself dangerously soft, vulnerable, and ready to mate. At the right moment, the male, now converted into a careful lover, deposits a packet of sperm into the appropriate receptacle. Afterward, the female hangs around, and hardens up for a couple of weeks (another phenomenon not entirely unknown among human beings). At her leisure, she returns to her own domicile, laden with fertilized eggs. At

this point another female will attempt the same thing—and so on. The dominant male, with his upright and confident posture, not only gets the prime real estate and easiest access to the best hunting grounds. He also gets all the girls. It is exponentially more worthwhile to be successful, if you are a lobster, and male.

Why is all this relevant? For an amazing number of reasons, apart from those that are comically obvious. First, we know that lobsters have been around, in one form or another, for more than 350 million years.[16] This is a very long time. Sixty-five million years ago, there were still dinosaurs. That is the unimaginably distant past to us. To the lobsters, however, dinosaurs were the *nouveau riche*, who appeared and disappeared in the flow of near-eternal time. This means that dominance hierarchies have been an essentially permanent feature of the environment to which all complex life has adapted. A third of a billion years ago, brains and nervous systems were comparatively simple. Nonetheless, they already had the structure and neurochemistry necessary to process information about status and society. The importance of this fact can hardly be overstated.

The Nature of Nature

It is a truism of biology that evolution is conservative. When something evolves, it must build upon what nature has already produced. New features may be added, and old features may undergo some alteration, but most things remain the same. It is for this reason that the wings of bats, the hands of human beings, and the fins of whales look astonishingly alike in their skeletal form. They even have the same number of bones. Evolution laid down the cornerstones for basic physiology long ago.

Now evolution works, in large part, through variation and natural selection. Variation exists for many reasons, including gene-shuffling (to put it simply) and random mutation. Individuals vary within a species for such reasons. Nature chooses from among them, across time. That theory, as stated, appears to account for the continual alteration of life-forms over the eons. But there’s an additional question lurking under the surface: what exactly is the “nature” in “natural selection”? What exactly is “the environment” to which animals adapt? We make many assumptions about nature—about the environment—

and these have consequences. Mark Twain once said, “It’s not what we don’t know that gets us in trouble. It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.”

First, it is easy to assume that “nature” is something with a nature—something static. But it’s not: at least not in any simple sense. It’s static and dynamic, at the same time. The environment—the nature that selects—itself transforms. The famous yin and yang symbols of the Taoists capture this beautifully. Being, for the Taoists—reality itself—is composed of two opposing principles, often translated as feminine and masculine, or even more narrowly as female and male. However, yin and yang are more accurately understood as chaos and order. The Taoist symbol is a circle enclosing twin serpents, head to tail. The black serpent, chaos, has a white dot in its head. The white serpent, order, has a black dot in its head. This is because chaos and order are interchangeable, as well as eternally juxtaposed. There is nothing so certain that it cannot vary. Even the sun itself has its cycles of instability. Likewise, there is nothing so mutable that it cannot be fixed. Every revolution produces a new order. Every death is, simultaneously, a metamorphosis.

Considering nature as purely static produces serious errors of apprehension. Nature “selects.” The idea of *selects* contains implicitly nested within it the idea of *fitness*. It is “fitness” that is “selected.” Fitness, roughly speaking, is the probability that a given organism will leave offspring (will propagate its genes through time). The “fit” in “fitness” is therefore the matching of organismal attribute to environmental demand. If that demand is conceptualized as static—if nature is conceptualized as eternal and unchanging—then evolution is a never-ending series of linear improvements, and fitness is something that can be ever more closely approximated across time. The still-powerful Victorian idea of evolutionary progress, with man at the pinnacle, is a partial consequence of this model of nature. It produces the erroneous notion that there is a destination of natural selection (increasing fitness to the environment), and that it can be conceptualized as a fixed point.

But nature, the selecting agent, is not a static selector—not in any simple sense. Nature dresses differently for each occasion. Nature varies like a musical score—and that, in part, explains why music produces its deep intimations of meaning. As the environment supporting a species transforms and changes, the features that make a given individual successful in surviving and reproducing also transform and change. Thus, the theory of natural

selection does not posit creatures matching themselves ever more precisely to a template specified by the world. It is more that creatures are in a dance with nature, albeit one that is deadly. “In my kingdom,” as the Red Queen tells Alice in Wonderland, “you have to run as fast as you can just to stay in the same place.” No one standing still can triumph, no matter how well constituted.

Nature is not simply dynamic, either. Some things change quickly, but they are nested within other things that change less quickly (music frequently models this, too). Leaves change more quickly than trees, and trees more quickly than forests. Weather changes faster than climate. If it wasn’t this way, then the conservatism of evolution would not work, as the basic morphology of arms and hands would have to change as fast as the length of arm bones and the function of fingers. It’s chaos, within order, within chaos, within higher order. The order that is most real is the order that is most unchanging—and that is not necessarily the order that is most easily seen. The leaf, when perceived, might blind the observer to the tree. The tree can blind him to the forest. And some things that are most real (such as the ever-present dominance hierarchy) cannot be “seen” at all.

It is also a mistake to conceptualize nature romantically. Rich, modern city-dwellers, surrounded by hot, baking concrete, imagine the environment as something pristine and paradisal, like a French impressionist landscape. Eco-activists, even more idealistic in their viewpoint, envision nature as harmoniously balanced and perfect, absent the disruptions and depredations of mankind. Unfortunately, “the environment” is also elephantiasis and guinea worms (don’t ask), anopheles mosquitoes and malaria, starvation-level droughts, AIDS and the Black Plague. We don’t fantasize about the beauty of these aspects of nature, although they are just as real as their Edenic counterparts. It is because of the existence of such things, of course, that we attempt to modify our surroundings, protecting our children, building cities and transportation systems and growing food and generating power. If Mother Nature wasn’t so hell-bent on our destruction, it would be easier for us to exist in simple harmony with her dictates.

And this brings us to a third erroneous concept: that nature is something strictly segregated from the cultural constructs that have emerged within it. The order within the chaos and order of Being is all the more “natural” the longer it has lasted. This is because “nature” is “what selects,” and the longer

a feature has existed the more time it has had to be selected—and to shape life. It does not matter whether that feature is physical and biological, or social and cultural. All that matters, from a Darwinian perspective, is permanence—and the dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear, has been around for some half a billion years. It's permanent. It's real. The dominance hierarchy is not capitalism. It's not communism, either, for that matter. It's not the military-industrial complex. It's not the patriarchy—that disposable, malleable, arbitrary cultural artefact. It's not even a human creation; not in the most profound sense. It is instead a near-eternal aspect of the environment, and much of what is blamed on these more ephemeral manifestations is a consequence of its unchanging existence. We (the sovereign *we*, the *we* that has been around since the beginning of life) have lived in a dominance hierarchy for a long, long time. We were struggling for position before we had skin, or hands, or lungs, or bones. There is little more natural than culture. Dominance hierarchies are older than trees.

The part of our brain that keeps track of our position in the dominance hierarchy is therefore exceptionally ancient and fundamental.[17] It is a master control system, modulating our perceptions, values, emotions, thoughts and actions. It powerfully affects every aspect of our Being, conscious and unconscious alike. This is why, when we are defeated, we act very much like lobsters who have lost a fight. Our posture droops. We face the ground. We feel threatened, hurt, anxious and weak. If things do not improve, we become chronically depressed. Under such conditions, we can't easily put up the kind of fight that life demands, and we become easy targets for harder-shelled bullies. And it is not only the behavioural and experiential similarities that are striking. Much of the basic neurochemistry is the same.

Consider serotonin, the chemical that governs posture and escape in the lobster. Low-ranking lobsters produce comparatively low levels of serotonin. This is also true of low-ranking human beings (and those low levels decrease more with each defeat). Low serotonin means decreased confidence. Low serotonin means more response to stress and costlier physical preparedness for emergency—as anything whatsoever may happen, at any time, at the bottom of the dominance hierarchy (and rarely something good). Low serotonin means less happiness, more pain and anxiety, more illness, and a shorter lifespan—among humans, just as among crustaceans. Higher spots in

the dominance hierarchy, and the higher serotonin levels typical of those who inhabit them, are characterized by less illness, misery and death, even when factors such as absolute income—or number of decaying food scraps—are held constant. The importance of this can hardly be overstated.

Top and Bottom

There is an unspeakably primordial calculator, deep within you, at the very foundation of your brain, far below your thoughts and feelings. It monitors exactly where you are positioned in society—on a scale of one to ten, for the sake of argument. If you're a number one, the highest level of status, you're an overwhelming success. If you're male, you have preferential access to the best places to live and the highest-quality food. People compete to do you favours. You have limitless opportunity for romantic and sexual contact. You are a successful lobster, and the most desirable females line up and vie for your attention.[18]

If you're female, you have access to many high-quality suitors: tall, strong and symmetrical; creative, reliable, honest and generous. And, like your dominant male counterpart, you will compete ferociously, even pitilessly, to maintain or improve your position in the equally competitive female mating hierarchy. Although you are less likely to use physical aggression to do so, there are many effective verbal tricks and strategies at your disposal, including the disparaging of opponents, and you may well be expert at their use.

If you are a low-status ten, by contrast, male or female, you have nowhere to live (or nowhere good). Your food is terrible, when you're not going hungry. You're in poor physical and mental condition. You're of minimal romantic interest to anyone, unless they are as desperate as you. You are more likely to fall ill, age rapidly, and die young, with few, if any, to mourn you.[19] Even money itself may prove of little use. You won't know how to use it, because it is difficult to use money properly, particularly if you are unfamiliar with it. Money will make you liable to the dangerous temptations of drugs and alcohol, which are much more rewarding if you have been deprived of pleasure for a long period. Money will also make you a target for predators and psychopaths, who thrive on exploiting those who exist on the

lower rungs of society. The bottom of the dominance hierarchy is a terrible, dangerous place to be.

The ancient part of your brain specialized for assessing dominance watches how you are treated by other people. On that evidence, it renders a determination of your value and assigns you a status. If you are judged by your peers as of little worth, the counter restricts serotonin availability. That makes you much more physically and psychologically reactive to any circumstance or event that might produce emotion, particularly if it is negative. You need that reactivity. Emergencies are common at the bottom, and you must be ready to survive.

Unfortunately, that physical hyper-response, that constant alertness, burns up a lot of precious energy and physical resources. This response is really what everyone calls stress, and it is by no means only or even primarily psychological. It’s a reflection of the genuine constraints of unfortunate circumstances. When operating at the bottom, the ancient brain counter assumes that even the smallest unexpected impediment might produce an uncontrollable chain of negative events, which will have to be handled alone, as useful friends are rare indeed, on society’s fringes. You will therefore continually sacrifice what you could otherwise physically store for the future, using it up on heightened readiness and the possibility of immediate panicked action in the present. When you don’t know what to do, you must be prepared to do anything and everything, in case it becomes necessary. You’re sitting in your car with the gas and brake pedals both punched to the mat. Too much of that and everything falls apart. The ancient counter will even shut down your immune system, expending the energy and resources required for future health now, during the crises of the present. It will render you impulsive,[20] so that you will jump, for example, at any short-term mating opportunities, or any possibilities of pleasure, no matter how sub-par, disgraceful or illegal. It will leave you far more likely to live, or die, carelessly, for a rare opportunity at pleasure, when it manifests itself. The physical demands of emergency preparedness will wear you down in every way.[21]

If you have a high status, on the other hand, the counter’s cold, pre-reptilian mechanics assume that your niche is secure, productive and safe, and that you are well buttressed with social support. It thinks the chance that something will damage you is low and can be safely discounted. Change

might be opportunity, instead of disaster. The serotonin flows plentifully. This renders you confident and calm, standing tall and straight, and much less on constant alert. Because your position is secure, the future is likely to be good for you. It's worthwhile to think in the long term and plan for a better tomorrow. You don't need to grasp impulsively at whatever crumbs come your way, because you can realistically expect good things to remain available. You can delay gratification, without forgoing it forever. You can afford to be a reliable and thoughtful citizen.

Malfunction

Sometimes, however, the counter mechanism can go wrong. Erratic habits of sleeping and eating can interfere with its function. Uncertainty can throw it for a loop. The body, with its various parts, needs to function like a well-rehearsed orchestra. Every system must play its role properly, and at exactly the right time, or noise and chaos ensue. It is for this reason that routine is so necessary. The acts of life we repeat every day need to be automatized. They must be turned into stable and reliable habits, so they lose their complexity and gain predictability and simplicity. This can be perceived most clearly in the case of small children, who are delightful and comical and playful when their sleeping and eating schedules are stable, and horrible and whiny and nasty when they are not.

It is for such reasons that I always ask my clinical clients first about sleep. Do they wake up in the morning at approximately the time the typical person wakes up, and at the same time every day? If the answer is no, fixing that is the first thing I recommend. It doesn't matter so much if they go to bed at the same time each evening, but waking up at a consistent hour is a necessity. Anxiety and depression cannot be easily treated if the sufferer has unpredictable daily routines. The systems that mediate negative emotion are tightly tied to the properly cyclical circadian rhythms.

The next thing I ask about is breakfast. I counsel my clients to eat a fat and protein-heavy breakfast as soon as possible after they awaken (no simple carbohydrates, no sugars, as they are digested too rapidly, and produce a blood-sugar spike and rapid dip). This is because anxious and depressed people are already stressed, particularly if their lives have not been under control for a good while. Their bodies are therefore primed to hypersecrete

insulin, if they engage in any complex or demanding activity. If they do so after fasting all night and before eating, the excess insulin in their bloodstream will mop up all their blood sugar. Then they become hypoglycemic and psycho-physiologically unstable.[22] All day. Their systems cannot be reset until after more sleep. I have had many clients whose anxiety was reduced to subclinical levels merely because they started to sleep on a predictable schedule and eat breakfast.

Other bad habits can also interfere with the counter's accuracy. Sometimes this happens directly, for poorly understood biological reasons, and sometimes it happens because those habits initiate a complex positive feedback loop. A positive feedback loop requires an input detector, an amplifier, and some form of output. Imagine a signal picked up by the input detector, amplified, and then emitted, in amplified form. So far, so good. The trouble starts when the input detector detects that output, and runs it through the system again, amplifying and emitting it again. A few rounds of intensification and things get dangerously out of control.

Most people have been subject to the deafening howling of feedback at a concert, when the sound system squeals painfully. The microphone sends a signal to the speakers. The speakers emit the signal. The signal can be picked up by the microphone and sent through the system again, if it's too loud or too close to the speakers. The sound rapidly amplifies to unbearable levels, sufficient to destroy the speakers, if it continues.

The same destructive loop happens within people's lives. Much of the time, when it happens, we label it mental illness, even though it's not only or even at all occurring inside people's psyches. Addiction to alcohol or another mood-altering drug is a common positive-feedback process. Imagine a person who enjoys alcohol, perhaps a bit too much. He has a quick three or four drinks. His blood alcohol level spikes sharply. This can be extremely exhilarating, particularly for someone who has a genetic predisposition to alcoholism.[23] But it only occurs while blood alcohol levels are actively rising, and that only continues if the drinker keeps drinking. When he stops, not only does his blood alcohol level plateau and then start to sink, but his body begins to produce a variety of toxins, as it metabolizes the ethanol already consumed. He also starts to experience alcohol withdrawal, as the anxiety systems that were suppressed during intoxication start to hyper-

respond. A hangover is alcohol withdrawal (which quite frequently kills withdrawing alcoholics), and it starts all too soon after drinking ceases. To continue the warm glow, and stave off the unpleasant aftermath, the drinker may just continue to drink, until all the liquor in his house is consumed, the bars are closed and his money is spent.

The next day, the drinker wakes up, badly hungover. So far, this is just unfortunate. The real trouble starts when he discovers that his hangover can be “cured” with a few more drinks the morning after. Such a cure is, of course, temporary. It merely pushes the withdrawal symptoms a bit further into the future. But that might be what is required, in the short term, if the misery is sufficiently acute. So now he has learned to drink to cure his hangover. When the medication causes the disease, a positive feedback loop has been established. Alcoholism can quickly emerge under such conditions.

Something similar often happens to people who develop an anxiety disorder, such as agoraphobia. People with agoraphobia can become so overwhelmed with fear that they will no longer leave their homes. Agoraphobia is the consequence of a positive feedback loop. The first event that precipitates the disorder is often a panic attack. The sufferer is typically a middle-aged woman who has been too dependent on other people. Perhaps she went immediately from over-reliance on her father to a relationship with an older and comparatively dominant boyfriend or husband, with little or no break for independent existence.

In the weeks leading up to the emergence of her agoraphobia, such a woman typically experiences something unexpected and anomalous. It might be something physiological, such as heart palpitations, which are common in any case, and whose likelihood is increased during menopause, when the hormonal processes regulating a women’s psychological experience fluctuate unpredictably. Any perceptible alteration in heart-rate can trigger thoughts both of heart attack and an all-too-public and embarrassing display of post-heart attack distress and suffering (death and social humiliation constituting the two most basic fears). The unexpected occurrence might instead be conflict in the sufferer’s marriage, or the illness or death of a spouse. It might be a close friend’s divorce or hospitalization. Some real event typically precipitates the initial increase in fear of mortality and social judgment.[24]

After the shock, perhaps, the pre-agoraphobic woman leaves her house, and makes her way to the shopping mall. It’s busy and difficult to park. This makes her even more stressed. The thoughts of vulnerability occupying her mind since her recent unpleasant experience rise close to the surface. They trigger anxiety. Her heart rate rises. She begins to breathe shallowly and quickly. She feels her heart racing and begins to wonder if she is suffering a heart attack. This thought triggers more anxiety. She breathes even more shallowly, increasing the levels of carbon dioxide in her blood. Her heart rate increases again, because of her additional fear. She detects that, and her heart rate rises again.

Poof! Positive feedback loop. Soon the anxiety transforms into panic, regulated by a different brain system, designed for the severest of threats, which can be triggered by too much fear. She is overwhelmed by her symptoms, and heads for the emergency room, where after an anxious wait her heart function is checked. There is nothing wrong. But she is not reassured.

It takes an additional feedback loop to transform even that unpleasant experience into full-blown agoraphobia. The next time she needs to go to the mall, the pre-agoraphobic becomes anxious, remembering what happened last time. But she goes, anyway. On the way, she can feel her heart pounding. That triggers another cycle of anxiety and concern. To forestall panic, she avoids the stress of the mall and returns home. But now the anxiety systems in her brain note that she ran away from the mall, and conclude that the journey there was truly dangerous. Our anxiety systems are very practical. They assume that anything you run away from is dangerous. The proof of that is, of course, the fact you ran away.

So now the mall is tagged “too dangerous to approach” (or the budding agoraphobic has labelled herself, “too fragile to approach the mall”). Perhaps that is not yet taking things far enough to cause her real trouble. There are other places to shop. But maybe the nearby supermarket is mall-like enough to trigger a similar response, when she visits it instead, and then retreats. Now the supermarket occupies the same category. Then it’s the corner store. Then it’s buses and taxis and subways. Soon it’s everywhere. The agoraphobic will even eventually become afraid of her house, and would run away from that if she could. But she can’t. Soon she’s stuck in her home. Anxiety-induced retreat makes everything retreated from more anxiety-

inducing. Anxiety-induced retreat makes the self smaller and the ever-more-dangerous world larger.

There are many systems of interaction between brain, body and social world that can get caught in positive feedback loops. Depressed people, for example, can start feeling useless and burdensome, as well as grief-stricken and pained. This makes them withdraw from contact with friends and family. Then the withdrawal makes them more lonesome and isolated, and more likely to feel useless and burdensome. Then they withdraw more. In this manner, depression spirals and amplifies.

If someone is badly hurt at some point in life—traumatized—the dominance counter can transform in a manner that makes additional hurt more rather than less likely. This often happens in the case of people, now adults, who were viciously bullied during childhood or adolescence. They become anxious and easily upset. They shield themselves with a defensive crouch, and avoid the direct eye contact interpretable as a dominance challenge.

This means that the damage caused by the bullying (the lowering of status and confidence) can continue, even after the bullying has ended.[25] In the simplest of cases, the formerly lowly persons have matured and moved to new and more successful places in their lives. But they don't fully notice. Their now-counterproductive physiological adaptations to earlier reality remain, and they are more stressed and uncertain than is necessary. In more complex cases, a habitual assumption of subordination renders the person more stressed and uncertain than necessary, *and* their habitually submissive posturing continues to attract genuine negative attention from one or more of the fewer and generally less successful bullies still extant in the adult world. In such situations, the psychological consequence of the previous bullying increases the likelihood of continued bullying in the present (even though, strictly speaking, it wouldn't have to, because of maturation, or geographical relocation, or continued education, or improvement in objective status).

Rising Up

Sometimes people are bullied because they *can't* fight back. This can happen to people who are weaker, physically, than their opponents. This is one of the most common reasons for the bullying experienced by children. Even the

toughest of six-year-olds is no match for someone who is nine. A lot of that power differential disappears in adulthood, however, with the rough stabilization and matching of physical size (with the exception of that pertaining to men and women, with the former typically larger and stronger, particularly in the upper body) as well as the increased penalties generally applied in adulthood to those who insist upon continuing with physical intimidation.

But just as often, people are bullied because they *won't* fight back. This happens not infrequently to people who are by temperament compassionate and self-sacrificing—particularly if they are also high in negative emotion, and make a lot of gratifying noises of suffering when someone sadistic confronts them (children who cry more easily, for example, are more frequently bullied).[26] It also happens to people who have decided, for one reason or another, that all forms of aggression, including even feelings of anger, are morally wrong. I have seen people with a particularly acute sensitivity to petty tyranny and over-aggressive competitiveness restrict within themselves all the emotions that might give rise to such things. Often they are people whose fathers who were excessively angry and controlling. Psychological forces are never unidimensional in their value, however, and the truly appalling potential of anger and aggression to produce cruelty and mayhem are balanced by the ability of those primordial forces to push back against oppression, speak truth, and motivate resolute movement forward in times of strife, uncertainty and danger.

With their capacity for aggression strait-jacketed within a too-narrow morality, those who are only or merely compassionate and self-sacrificing (and naïve and exploitable) cannot call forth the genuinely righteous and appropriately self-protective anger necessary to defend themselves. If you *can* bite, you generally don't *have to*. When skillfully integrated, the ability to respond with aggression and violence decreases rather than increases the probability that actual aggression will become necessary. If you say no, early in the cycle of oppression, and you mean what you say (which means you state your refusal in no uncertain terms and stand behind it) then the scope for oppression on the part of oppressor will remain properly bounded and limited. The forces of tyranny expand inexorably to fill the space made available for their existence. People who refuse to muster appropriately self-

protective territorial responses are laid open to exploitation as much as those who genuinely can't stand up for their own rights because of a more essential inability or a true imbalance in power.

Naive, harmless people usually guide their perceptions and actions with a few simple axioms: people are basically good; no one really wants to hurt anyone else; the threat (and, certainly, the use) of force, physical or otherwise, is wrong. These axioms collapse, or worse, in the presence of individuals who are genuinely malevolent.[27] *Worse* means that naive beliefs can become a positive invitation to abuse, because those who aim to harm have become specialized to prey on people who think precisely such things. Under such conditions, the axioms of harmlessness must be retooled. In my clinical practice I often draw the attention of my clients who think that good people never become angry to the stark realities of their own resentments.

No one likes to be pushed around, but people often put up with it for too long. So, I get them to see their resentment, first, as anger, and then as an indication that something needs to be said, if not done (not least because honesty demands it). Then I get them to see such action as part of the force that holds tyranny at bay—at the social level, as much as the individual. Many bureaucracies have petty authoritarians within them, generating unnecessary rules and procedures simply to express and cement power. Such people produce powerful undercurrents of resentment around them which, if expressed, would limit their expression of pathological power. It is in this manner that the willingness of the individual to stand up for him or herself protects everyone from the corruption of society.

When naive people discover the capacity for anger within themselves, they are shocked, sometimes severely. A profound example of that can be found in the susceptibility of new soldiers to post-traumatic stress disorder, which often occurs because of something they watch themselves doing, rather than because of something that has happened to them. They react like the monsters they can truly be in extreme battlefield conditions, and the revelation of that capacity undoes their world. And no wonder. Perhaps they assumed that all of history's terrible perpetrators were people totally unlike themselves. Perhaps they were never able to see within themselves the capacity for oppression and bullying (and perhaps not their capacity for assertion and success, as well). I have had clients who were terrified into literally years of

daily hysterical convulsions by the sheer look of malevolence on their attackers' faces. Such individuals typically come from hyper-sheltered families, where nothing terrible is allowed to exist, and everything is fairyland wonderful (or else).

When the wakening occurs—when once-naïve people recognize in themselves the seeds of evil and monstrosity, and see themselves as dangerous (at least potentially) their fear decreases. They develop more self-respect. Then, perhaps, they begin to resist oppression. They see that they have the ability to withstand, because they are terrible too. They see they can and must stand up, because they begin to understand how genuinely monstrous they will become, otherwise, feeding on their resentment, transforming it into the most destructive of wishes. To say it again: There is very little difference between the capacity for mayhem and destruction, integrated, and strength of character. This is one of the most difficult lessons of life.

Maybe you are a loser. And maybe you're not—but if you are, you don't have to continue in that mode. Maybe you just have a bad habit. Maybe you're even just a collection of bad habits. Nonetheless, even if you came by your poor posture honestly—even if you were unpopular or bullied at home or in grade school[28]—it's not necessarily appropriate now. Circumstances change. If you slump around, with the same bearing that characterizes a defeated lobster, people will assign you a lower status, and the old counter that you share with crustaceans, sitting at the very base of your brain, will assign you a low dominance number. Then your brain will not produce as much serotonin. This will make you less happy, and more anxious and sad, and more likely to back down when you should stand up for yourself. It will also decrease the probability that you will get to live in a good neighbourhood, have access to the highest quality resources, and obtain a healthy, desirable mate. It will render you more likely to abuse cocaine and alcohol, as you live for the present in a world full of uncertain futures. It will increase your susceptibility to heart disease, cancer and dementia. All in all, it's just not good.

Circumstances change, and so can you. Positive feedback loops, adding effect to effect, can spiral counterproductively in a negative direction, but can also work to get you ahead. That's the other, far more optimistic lesson of

Price's law and the Pareto distribution: those who start to have will probably get more. Some of these upwardly moving loops can occur in your own private, subjective space. Alterations in body language offer an important example. If you are asked by a researcher to move your facial muscles, one at a time, into a position that would look sad to an observer, you will report feeling sadder. If you are asked to move the muscles one by one into a position that looks happy, you will report feeling happier. Emotion is partly bodily expression, and can be amplified (or dampened) by that expression.[29]

Some of the positive feedback loops instantiated by body language can occur beyond the private confines of subjective experience, in the social space you share with other people. If your posture is poor, for example—if you slump, shoulders forward and rounded, chest tucked in, head down, looking small, defeated and ineffectual (protected, in theory, against attack from behind)—then you will feel small, defeated and ineffectual. The reactions of others will amplify that. People, like lobsters, size each other up, partly in consequence of stance. If you present yourself as defeated, then people will react to you as if you are losing. If you start to straighten up, then people will look at and treat you differently.

You might object: the bottom is real. Being at the bottom is equally real. A mere transformation of posture is insufficient to change anything that fixed. If you're in number ten position, then standing up straight and appearing dominant might only attract the attention of those who want, once again, to put you down. And fair enough. But standing up straight with your shoulders back is not something that is only physical, because you're not only a body. You're a spirit, so to speak—a psyche—as well. Standing up physically also implies and invokes and demands standing up metaphysically. Standing up means voluntarily accepting the burden of Being. Your nervous system responds in an entirely different manner when you face the demands of life voluntarily. You respond to a challenge, instead of bracing for a catastrophe. You see the gold the dragon hoards, instead of shrinking in terror from the all-too-real fact of the dragon. You step forward to take your place in the dominance hierarchy, and occupy your territory, manifesting your willingness to defend, expand and transform it. That can all occur practically or symbolically, as a physical or as a conceptual restructuring.

To stand up straight with your shoulders back is to accept the terrible responsibility of life, with eyes wide open. It means deciding to voluntarily transform the chaos of potential into the realities of habitable order. It means adopting the burden of self-conscious vulnerability, and accepting the end of the unconscious paradise of childhood, where finitude and mortality are only dimly comprehended. It means willingly undertaking the sacrifices necessary to generate a productive and meaningful reality (it means acting to please God, in the ancient language).

To stand up straight with your shoulders back means building the ark that protects the world from the flood, guiding your people through the desert after they have escaped tyranny, making your way away from comfortable home and country, and speaking the prophetic word to those who ignore the widows and children. It means shouldering the cross that marks the X, the place where you and Being intersect so terribly. It means casting dead, rigid and too tyrannical order back into the chaos in which it was generated; it means withstanding the ensuing uncertainty, and establishing, in consequence, a better, more meaningful and more productive order.

So, attend carefully to your posture. Quit drooping and hunching around. Speak your mind. Put your desires forward, as if you had a right to them—at least the same right as others. Walk tall and gaze forthrightly ahead. Dare to be dangerous. Encourage the serotonin to flow plentifully through the neural pathways desperate for its calming influence.

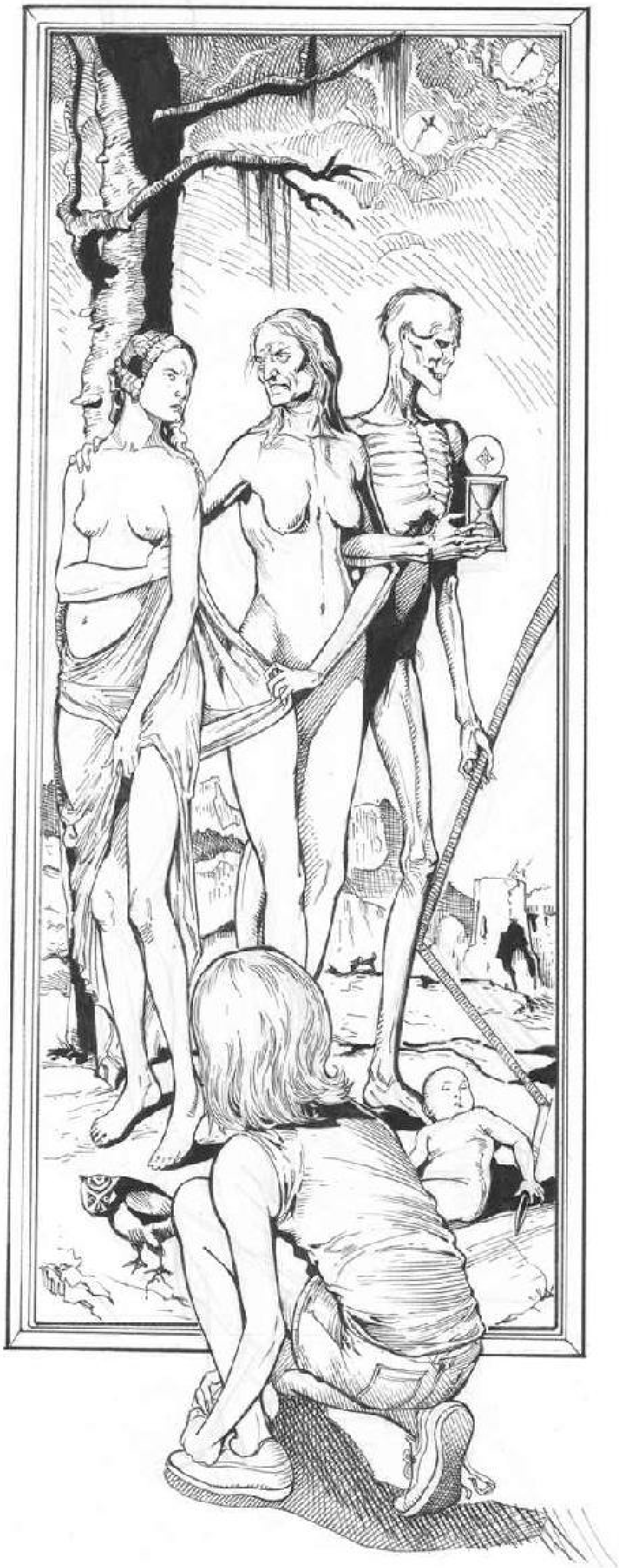
People, including yourself, will start to assume that you are competent and able (or at least they will not immediately conclude the reverse). Emboldened by the positive responses you are now receiving, you will begin to be less anxious. You will then find it easier to pay attention to the subtle social clues that people exchange when they are communicating. Your conversations will flow better, with fewer awkward pauses. This will make you more likely to meet people, interact with them, and impress them. Doing so will not only genuinely increase the probability that good things will happen to you—it will also make those good things feel better when they do happen.

Thus strengthened and emboldened, you may choose to embrace Being, and work for its furtherance and improvement. Thus strengthened, you may be able to stand, even during the illness of a loved one, even during the death of a parent, and allow others to find strength alongside you when they would otherwise be overwhelmed with despair. Thus emboldened, you will embark

on the voyage of your life, let your light shine, so to speak, on the heavenly hill, and pursue your rightful destiny. Then the meaning of your life may be sufficient to keep the corrupting influence of mortal despair at bay.

Then you may be able to accept the terrible burden of the World, and find joy.

Look for your inspiration to the victorious lobster, with its 350 million years of practical wisdom. Stand up straight, with your shoulders back.



RULE 2

TREAT YOURSELF LIKE SOMEONE YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING

WHY WON'T YOU JUST TAKE YOUR DAMN PILLS?

Imagine that a hundred people are prescribed a drug. Consider what happens next. One-third of them won't fill the prescription.[30] Half of the remaining sixty-seven will fill it, but won't take the medication correctly. They'll miss doses. They'll quit taking it early. They might not even take it at all.

Physicians and pharmacists tend to blame such patients for their noncompliance, inaction and error. You can lead a horse to water, they reason. Psychologists tend to take a dim view of such judgments. We are trained to assume that the failure of patients to follow professional advice is the fault of the practitioner, not the patient. We believe the health-care provider has a responsibility to profer advice that will be followed, offer interventions that will be respected, plan with the patient or client until the desired result is achieved, and follow up to ensure that everything is going correctly. This is just one of the many things that make psychologists so wonderful – :). Of course, we have the luxury of time with our clients, unlike other more beleaguered professionals, who wonder why sick people won't take their medication. What's wrong with them? Don't they want to get better?

Here's something worse. Imagine that someone receives an organ transplant. Imagine it's a kidney. A transplant typically occurs only after a long period of anxious waiting on the part of the recipient. Only a minority of people donate organs when they die (and even fewer when they are still alive). Only a small number of donated organs are a good match for any hopeful recipient. This means that the typical kidney transplantee has been undergoing dialysis, the only alternative, for years. Dialysis involves passing all the patient's blood out of his or her body, through a machine, and back in. It is an unlikely and miraculous treatment, so that's all good, but it's not

pleasant. It must happen five to seven times a week, for eight hours a time. It should happen every time the patient sleeps. That’s too much. No one wants to stay on dialysis.

Now, one of the complications of transplantation is rejection. Your body does not like it when parts of someone else’s body are stitched into it. Your immune system will attack and destroy such foreign elements, even when they are crucial to your survival. To stop this from happening, you must take anti-rejection drugs, which weaken immunity, increasing your susceptibility to infectious disease. Most people are happy to accept the trade-off. Recipients of transplants still suffer the effects of organ rejection, despite the existence and utility of these drugs. It’s not because the drugs fail (although they sometimes do). It’s more often because those prescribed the drugs do not take them. This beggars belief. It is seriously not good to have your kidneys fail. Dialysis is no picnic. Transplantation surgery occurs after long waiting, at high risk and great expense. To lose all that because you don’t take your medication? How could people do that to themselves? How could this possibly be?

It’s complicated, to be fair. Many people who receive a transplanted organ are isolated, or beset by multiple physical health problems (to say nothing of problems associated with unemployment or family crisis). They may be cognitively impaired or depressed. They may not entirely trust their doctor, or understand the necessity of the medication. Maybe they can barely afford the drugs, and ration them, desperately and unproductively.

But—and this is the amazing thing—imagine that it isn’t you who feels sick. It’s your dog. So, you take him to the vet. The vet gives you a prescription. What happens then? You have just as many reasons to distrust a vet as a doctor. Furthermore, if you cared so little for your pet that you weren’t concerned with what improper, substandard or error-ridden prescription he might be given, you wouldn’t have taken him to the vet in the first place. Thus, you care. Your actions prove it. In fact, on average, you care *more*. People are better at filling and properly administering prescription medication to their pets than to themselves. That’s not good. Even from your pet’s perspective, it’s not good. Your pet (probably) loves you, and would be happier if you took your medication.

It is difficult to conclude anything from this set of facts except that people appear to love their dogs, cats, ferrets and birds (and maybe even their

lizards) more than themselves. How horrible is that? How much shame must exist, for something like that to be true? What could it be about people that makes them prefer their pets to themselves?

It was an ancient story in the Book of Genesis—the first book in the Old Testament—that helped me find an answer to that perplexing question.

The Oldest Story and the Nature of the World

Two stories of Creation from two different Middle Eastern sources appear to be woven together in the Genesis account. In the chronologically first but historically more recent account—known as the "Priestly"—God created the cosmos, using His divine Word, speaking light, water and land into existence, following that with the plants and the heavenly bodies. Then He created birds and animals and fish (again, employing speech)—and ended with man, male and female, both somehow formed in his image. That all happens in Genesis 1. In the second, older, "Jawhist" version, we find another origin account, involving Adam and Eve (where the details of creation differ somewhat), as well as the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah and the Tower of Babel. That is Genesis 2 to 11. To understand Genesis 1, the Priestly story, with its insistence on speech as the fundamental creative force, it is first necessary to review a few fundamental, ancient assumptions (these are markedly different in type and intent from the assumptions of science, which are, historically speaking, quite novel).

Scientific truths were made explicit a mere five hundred years ago, with the work of Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Isaac Newton. In whatever manner our forebears viewed the world prior to that, it was not through a scientific lens (any more than they could view the moon and the stars through the glass lenses of the equally recent telescope). Because we are so scientific now—and so determinedly materialistic—it is very difficult for us even to understand that other ways of seeing can and do exist. But those who existed during the distant time in which the foundational epics of our culture emerged were much more concerned with the actions that dictated survival (and with interpreting the world in a manner commensurate with that goal) than with anything approximating what we now understand as objective truth.

Before the dawn of the scientific worldview, reality was construed differently. Being was understood as a place of action, not a place of things.[31]

It was understood as something more akin to story or drama. That story or drama was lived, subjective experience, as it manifested itself moment to moment in the consciousness of every living person. It was something similar to the stories we tell each other about our lives and their personal significance; something similar to the happenings that novelists describe when they capture existence in the pages of their books. Subjective experience—that includes familiar objects such as trees and clouds, primarily objective in their existence, but also (and more importantly) such things as emotions and dreams as well as hunger, thirst and pain. It is such things, experienced personally, that are the most fundamental elements of human life, from the archaic, dramatic perspective, and they are not easily reducible to the detached and objective—even by the modern reductionist, materialist mind. Take pain, for example—subjective pain. That's something so real no argument can stand against it. Everyone acts as if their pain is real—ultimately, finally real. Pain matters, more than matter matters. It is for this reason, I believe, that so many of the world's traditions regard the suffering attendant upon existence as the irreducible truth of Being.

In any case, *that which we subjectively experience* can be likened much more to a novel or a movie than to a scientific description of physical reality. It is the drama of lived experience—the unique, tragic, personal death of your father, compared to the objective death listed in the hospital records; the pain of your first love; the despair of dashed hopes; the joy attendant upon a child's success.

The Domain, Not of Matter, but of What Matters

The scientific world of matter can be reduced, in some sense, to its fundamental constituent elements: molecules, atoms, even quarks. However, the world of experience has primal constituents, as well. These are the necessary elements whose interactions define drama and fiction. One of these is chaos. Another is order. The third (as there are three) is the process that mediates between the two, which appears identical to what modern people call consciousness. It is our eternal subjugation to the first two that makes us doubt the validity of existence—that makes us throw up our hands in despair, and fail to care for ourselves properly. It is proper understanding of the third that allows us the only real way out.

Chaos is the domain of ignorance itself. It's *unexplored territory*. Chaos is what extends, eternally and without limit, beyond the boundaries of all states, all ideas, and all disciplines. It's the foreigner, the stranger, the member of another gang, the rustle in the bushes in the night-time, the monster under the bed, the hidden anger of your mother, and the sickness of your child. Chaos is the despair and horror you feel when you have been profoundly betrayed. It's the place you end up when things fall apart; when your dreams die, your career collapses, or your marriage ends. It's the underworld of fairytale and myth, where the dragon and the gold it guards eternally co-exist. Chaos is where we are when we don't know where we are, and what we are doing when we don't know what we are doing. It is, in short, all those things and situations we neither know nor understand.

Chaos is also the formless potential from which the God of Genesis 1 called forth order using language at the beginning of time. It's the same potential from which we, made in that Image, call forth the novel and ever-changing moments of our lives. And Chaos is freedom, dreadful freedom, too.

Order, by contrast, is *explored territory*. That's the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position and authority. That's the structure of society. It's the structure provided by biology, too—particularly insofar as you are adapted, as you are, to the structure of society. Order is tribe, religion, hearth, home and country. It's the warm, secure living-room where the fireplace glows and the children play. It's the flag of the nation. It's the value of the currency. Order is the floor beneath your feet, and your plan for the day. It's the greatness of tradition, the rows of desks in a school classroom, the trains that leave on time, the calendar, and the clock. Order is the public façade we're called upon to wear, the politeness of a gathering of civilized strangers, and the thin ice on which we all skate. Order is the place where the behavior of the world matches our expectations and our desires; the place where all things turn out the way we want them to. But order is sometimes tyranny and stultification, as well, when the demand for certainty and uniformity and purity becomes too one-sided.

Where everything is certain, we're in order. We're there when things are going according to plan and nothing is new and disturbing. In the domain of order, things behave as God intended. We like to be there. Familiar environments are congenial. In order, we're able to think about things in the

long term. There, things work, and we’re stable, calm and competent. We seldom leave places we understand—geographical or conceptual—for that reason, and we certainly do not like it when we are compelled to or when it happens accidentally.

You’re in order, when you have a loyal friend, a trustworthy ally. When the same person betrays you, sells you out, you move from the daytime world of clarity and light to the dark underworld of chaos, confusion and despair. That’s the same move you make, and the same place you visit, when the company you work starts to fail and your job is placed in doubt. When your tax return has been filed, that’s order. When you’re audited, that’s chaos. Most people would rather be mugged than audited. Before the Twin Towers fell—that was order. Chaos manifested itself afterward. Everyone felt it. The very air became uncertain. What exactly was it that fell? Wrong question. What exactly remained standing? That was the issue at hand.

When the ice you’re skating on is solid, that’s order. When the bottom drops out, and things fall apart, and you plunge through the ice, that’s chaos. Order is the Shire of Tolkien’s hobbits: peaceful, productive and safely inhabitable, even by the naive. Chaos is the underground kingdom of the dwarves, usurped by Smaug, the treasure-hoarding serpent. Chaos is the deep ocean bottom to which Pinocchio voyaged to rescue his father from Monstro, whale and fire-breathing dragon. That journey into darkness and rescue is the most difficult thing a puppet must do, if he wants to be real; if he wants to extract himself from the temptations of deceit and acting and victimization and impulsive pleasure and totalitarian subjugation; if he wants to take his place as a genuine Being in the world.

Order is the stability of your marriage. It’s buttressed by the traditions of the past and by your expectations—grounded, often invisibly, in those traditions. Chaos is that stability crumbling under your feet when you discover your partner’s infidelity. Chaos is the experience of reeling unbound and unsupported through space when your guiding routines and traditions collapse.

Order is the place and time where the oft-invisible axioms you live by organize your experience and your actions so that what should happen does happen. Chaos is the new place and time that emerges when tragedy strikes suddenly, or malevolence reveals its paralyzing visage, even in the confines of your own home. Something unexpected or undesired can always make its

appearance, when a plan is being laid out, regardless of how familiar the circumstances. When that happens, the territory has shifted. Make no mistake about it: the space, the apparent space, may be the same. But we live in time, as well as space. In consequence, even the oldest and most familiar places retain an ineradicable capacity to surprise you. You may be cruising happily down the road in the automobile you have known and loved for years. But time is passing. The brakes could fail. You might be walking down the road in the body you have always relied on. If your heart malfunctions, even momentarily, everything changes. Friendly old dogs can still bite. Old and trusted friends can still deceive. New ideas can destroy old and comfortable certainties. Such things matter. They're real.

Our brains respond instantly when chaos appears, with simple, hyper-fast circuits maintained from the ancient days, when our ancestors dwelled in trees, and snakes struck in a flash.[32] After that nigh-instantaneous, deeply reflexive bodily response comes the later-evolving, more complex but slower responses of emotions—and, after that, comes thinking, of the higher order, which can extend over seconds, minutes or years. All that response is instinctive, in some sense—but the faster the response, the more instinctive.

Chaos and Order: Personality, Female and Male

Chaos and order are two of the most fundamental elements of lived experience—two of the most basic subdivisions of Being itself. But they're not things, or objects, and they're not experienced as such. Things or objects are part of the objective world. They're inanimate; spiritless. They're dead. This is not true of chaos and order. Those are perceived, experienced and understood (to the degree that they are understood at all) as personalities—and that is just as true of the perceptions, experiences and understanding of modern people as their ancient forebears. It's just that moderners don't notice.

Order and chaos are not understood first, objectively (as things or objects), and *then* personified. That would only be the case if we perceived objective reality *first*, and *then* inferred intent and purpose. But that isn't how perception operates, despite our preconceptions. Perception of things as tools, for example, occurs before or in concert with perception of things as objects. We see what things mean just as fast or faster than we see what they are.[33]

Perception of things as entities with personality also occurs before perception of things as things. This is particularly true of the action of others,[34] living others, but we also see the non-living "objective world" as animated, with purpose and intent. This is because of the operation of what psychologists have called "the hyperactive agency detector" within us.[35] We evolved, over millennia, within intensely social circumstances. This means that the most significant elements of our environment of origin were personalities, not things, objects or situations.

The personalities we have evolved to perceive have been around, in predictable form, and in typical, hierarchical configurations, forever, for all intents and purposes. They have been male or female, for example, for a billion years. That's a long time. The division of life into its twin sexes occurred before the evolution of multi-cellular animals. It was in a still-respectable one-fifth of that time that mammals, who take extensive care of their young, emerged. Thus, the category of "parent" and/or "child" has been around for 200 million years. That's longer than birds have existed. That's longer than flowers have grown. It's not a billion years, but it's still a very long time. It's plenty long enough for male and female and parent and child to serve as vital and fundamental parts of the environment to which we have adapted. This means that male and female and parent and child are categories, for us—natural categories, deeply embedded in our perceptual, emotional and motivational structures.

Our brains are deeply social. Other creatures (particularly, other humans) were crucially important to us as we lived, mated and evolved. Those creatures were literally our natural habitat—our environment. From a Darwinian perspective, nature—reality itself; the environment, itself—is *what selects*. The environment cannot be defined in any more fundamental manner. It is not mere inert matter. Reality itself is whatever we contend with when we are striving to survive and reproduce. A lot of that is other beings, their opinions of us, and their communities. And that's that.

Over the millennia, as our brain capacity increased and we developed curiosity to spare, we became increasingly aware of and curious about the nature of the world—what we eventually conceptualized as the objective world—outside the personalities of family and troupe. And "outside" is not merely unexplored physical territory. *Outside* is outside of what we currently

understand—and understanding is *dealing with* and *coping with* and not merely *representing objectively*. But our brains had been long concentrating on other people. Thus, it appears that we first began to perceive the unknown, chaotic, non-human world with the innate categories of our social brain.[36] And even this is a misstatement: when we first began to perceive the unknown, chaotic, non-animal world, we used categories that had originally evolved to represent the *pre-human animal social world*. Our minds are far older than mere humanity. Our categories are far older than our species. Our most basic category—as old, in some sense, as the sexual act itself—appears to be that of sex, male and female. We appear to have taken that primordial knowledge of structured, creative opposition and begun to interpret everything through its lens.[37]

Order, the known, appears symbolically associated with masculinity (as illustrated in the aforementioned *yang* of the Taoist yin-yang symbol). This is perhaps because the primary hierarchical structure of human society is masculine, as it is among most animals, including the chimpanzees who are our closest genetic and, arguably, behavioural match. It is because men are and throughout history have been the builders of towns and cities, the engineers, stonemasons, bricklayers, and lumberjacks, the operators of heavy machinery.[38] Order is God the Father, the eternal Judge, ledger-keeper and dispenser of rewards and punishments. Order is the peacetime army of policemen and soldiers. It's the political culture, the corporate environment, and the system. It's the "they" in "you know what they say." It's credit cards, classrooms, supermarket checkout lineups, turn-taking, traffic lights, and the familiar routes of daily commuters. Order, when pushed too far, when imbalanced, can also manifest itself destructively and terribly. It does so as the forced migration, the concentration camp, and the soul-devouring uniformity of the goose-step.

Chaos—the unknown—is symbolically associated with the feminine. This is partly because all the things we have come to know were born, originally, of the unknown, just as all beings we encounter were born of mothers. Chaos is *mater*, origin, source, mother; *materia*, the substance from which all things are made. It is also *what matters*, or *what is the matter*—the very subject matter of thought and communication. In its positive guise, chaos is possibility itself, the source of ideas, the mysterious realm of gestation and

birth. As a negative force, it's the impenetrable darkness of a cave and the accident by the side of the road. It's the mother grizzly, all compassion to her cubs, who marks you as potential predator and tears you to pieces.

Chaos, the eternal feminine, is also the crushing force of sexual selection. Women are choosy maters (unlike female chimps, their closest animal counterparts[39]). Most men do not meet female human standards. It is for this reason that women on dating sites rate 85 percent of men as below average in attractiveness.[40] It is for this reason that we all have twice as many female ancestors as male (imagine that all the women who have ever lived have averaged one child. Now imagine that half the men who have ever lived have fathered two children, if they had any, while the other half fathered none).[41] It is Woman as Nature who looks at half of all men and says, "No!" For the men, that's a direct encounter with chaos, and it occurs with devastating force every time they are turned down for a date. Human female choosiness is also why we are very different from the common ancestor we shared with our chimpanzee cousins, while the latter are very much the same. Women's proclivity to say no, more than any other force, has shaped our evolution into the creative, industrious, upright, large-brained (competitive, aggressive, domineering) creatures that we are.[42] It is Nature as Woman who says, "Well, bucko, you're good enough for a friend, but my experience of you so far has not indicated the suitability of your genetic material for continued propagation."

The most profound religious symbols rely for their power in large part on this underlying fundamentally bipartisan conceptual subdivision. The Star of David is, for example, the downward pointing triangle of femininity and the upward pointing triangle of the male. [fn1] It's the same for the *yoni* and *lingam* of Hinduism (which come covered with snakes, our ancient adversaries and provocateurs: the Shiva Linga is depicted with snake deities called the Nagas). The ancient Egyptians represented Osiris, god of the state, and Isis, goddess of the underworld, as twin cobras with their tails knotted together. The same symbol was used in China to portray Fuxi and Nuwa, creators of humanity and of writing. The representations in Christianity are less abstract, more like personalities, but the familiar Western images of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child and the Pietà both express the female/male dual unity, as does the traditional insistence on the androgyny of Christ.[43]

It should also be noted, finally, that the structure of the brain itself at a gross morphological level appears to reflect this duality. This, to me, indicates the fundamental, beyond-the-metaphorical reality of this symbolically feminine/masculine divide, since the brain is adapted, by definition, to reality itself (that is, reality conceptualized in this quasi-Darwinian manner). Elkhonon Goldberg, student of the great Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria, has proposed quite lucidly and directly that the very hemispheric structure of the cortex reflects the fundamental division between novelty (the unknown, or chaos) and routinization (the known, order).[44] He doesn't make reference to the symbols representing the structure of the world in reference to this theory, but that's all the better: an idea is more credible when it emerges as a consequence of investigations in different realms.[45]

We already know all this, but we don't know we know it. But we immediately comprehend it when it's articulated in a manner such as this. Everyone understands order and chaos, world and underworld, when it's explained using these terms. We all have a palpable sense of the chaos lurking under everything familiar. That's why we understand the strange, surreal stories of *Pinocchio*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Lion King*, and *The Little Mermaid*, and *Beauty and the Beast*, with their eternal landscapes of known and unknown, world and underworld. We've all been in both places, many times: sometimes by happenstance, sometimes by choice.

Many things begin to fall into place when you begin to consciously understand the world in this manner. It's as if the knowledge of your body and soul falls into alignment with the knowledge of your intellect. And there's more: such knowledge is proscriptive, as well as descriptive. This is the kind of knowing *what* that helps you know *how*. This is the kind of *is* from which you can derive an *ought*. The Taoist juxtaposition of yin and yang, for example, doesn't simply portray chaos and order as the fundamental elements of Being—it also tells you how to act. The Way, the Taoist path of life, is represented by (or exists on) the border between the twin serpents. The Way is the path of proper Being. It's the same Way as that referred to by Christ in John 14:6: *I am the way, and the truth and the life*. The same idea is expressed in Matthew 7:14: *Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*

We eternally inhabit order, surrounded by chaos. We eternally occupy known territory, surrounded by the unknown. We experience meaningful engagement when we mediate appropriately between them. We are adapted, in the deepest Darwinian sense, not to the world of objects, but to the meta-realities of order and chaos, yang and yin. Chaos and order make up the eternal, transcendent environment of the living.

To straddle that fundamental duality is to be balanced: to have one foot firmly planted in order and security, and the other in chaos, possibility, growth and adventure. When life suddenly reveals itself as intense, gripping and meaningful; when time passes and you're so engrossed in what you're doing you don't notice—it is there and then that you are located precisely on the border between order and chaos. The subjective meaning that we encounter there is the reaction of our deepest being, our neurologically and evolutionarily grounded instinctive self, indicating that we are ensuring the stability but also the expansion of habitable, productive territory, of space that is personal, social and natural. It's the right place to be, in every sense. You are there when—and where—it matters. That's what music is telling you, too, when you're listening—even more, perhaps, when you're dancing—when its harmonious layered patterns of predictability and unpredictability make meaning itself well up from the most profound depths of your Being.

Chaos and order are fundamental elements because every lived situation (even every conceivable lived situation) is made up of both. No matter where we are, there are some things we can identify, make use of, and predict, and some things we neither know nor understand. No matter who we are, Kalahari Desert–dweller or Wall Street banker, some things are under our control, and some things are not. That's why both can understand the same stories, and dwell within the confines of the same eternal truths. Finally, the fundamental reality of chaos and order is true for everything alive, not only for us. Living things are always to be found in places they can master, surrounded by things and situations that make them vulnerable.

Order is not enough. You can't just be stable, and secure, and unchanging, because there are still vital and important new things to be learned. Nonetheless, chaos can be too much. You can't long tolerate being swamped and overwhelmed beyond your capacity to cope while you are learning what you still need to know. Thus, you need to place one foot in what you have mastered and understood and the other in what you are currently exploring

and mastering. Then you have positioned yourself where the terror of existence is under control and you are secure, but where you are also alert and engaged. That is where there is something new to master and some way that you can be improved. That is where meaning is to be found.

The Garden of Eden

Remember, as discussed earlier, that the Genesis stories were amalgamated from several sources. After the newer Priestly story (Genesis 1), recounting the emergence of order from chaos, comes the second, even more ancient, "Jahwist" part, beginning, essentially, with Genesis 2. The Jahwist account, which uses the name YHWH or Jahweh to represent God, contains the story of Adam and Eve, along with a much fuller explication of the events of the sixth day alluded to in the previous "Priestly" story. The continuity between the stories appears to be the result of careful editing by the person or persons known singly to biblical scholars as the "Redactor," who wove the stories together. This may have occurred when the peoples of two traditions united, for one reason or another, and the subsequent illogic of their melded stories, growing together over time in an ungainly fashion, bothered someone conscious, courageous, and obsessed with coherence.

According to the Jahwist creation story, God first created a bounded space, known as Eden (which, in Aramaic—Jesus's putative language—means well-watered place) or Paradise (*pairidaeza* in old Iranian or Avestan, which means walled or protected enclosure or garden). God placed Adam in there, along with all manner of fruit-bearing trees, two of which were marked out. One of these was the Tree of Life; the other, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God then told Adam to have his fill of fruit, as he wished, but added that the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was forbidden. After that, He created Eve as a partner for Adam.[fn2]

Adam and Eve don't seem very conscious, at the beginning, when they are first placed in Paradise, and they were certainly not self-conscious. As the story insists, the original parents were naked, but not ashamed. Such phrasing implies first that it's perfectly natural and normal for people to be ashamed of their nakedness (otherwise nothing would have to be said about its absence) and second that there was something amiss, for better or worse, with our first parents. Although there are exceptions, the only people around now who

would be unashamed if suddenly dropped naked into a public place—excepting the odd exhibitionist—are those younger than three years of age. In fact, a common nightmare involves the sudden appearance of the dreamer, naked, on a stage in front of a packed house.

In the third verse of Genesis, a serpent appears—first, apparently, in legged form. God only knows why He allowed—or placed—such a creature in the garden. I have long puzzled over the meaning of this. It seems to be a reflection, in part, of the order/chaos dichotomy characterizing all of experience, with Paradise serving as habitable order and the serpent playing the role of chaos. The serpent in Eden therefore means the same thing as the black dot in the yin side of the Taoist yin/yang symbol of totality—that is, the possibility of the unknown and revolutionary suddenly manifesting itself where everything appears calm.

It just does not appear possible, even for God himself, to make a bounded space completely protected from the outside—not in the real world, with its necessary limitations, surrounded by the transcendent. The outside, chaos, always sneaks into the inside, because nothing can be completely walled off from the rest of reality. So even the ultimate in safe spaces inevitably harbours a snake. There were—forever—genuine, quotidian, reptilian snakes in the grass and in the trees of our original African paradise.[46] Even had all of those been banished, however (in some inconceivable manner, by some primordial St. George) snakes would have still remained in the form of our primordial human rivals (at least when they were acting like enemies, from our limited, in-group, kin-bonded perspectives). There was, after all, no shortage of conflict and warfare among our ancestors, tribal and otherwise.[47]

And even if we had defeated all the snakes that beset us from without, reptilian and human alike, we would still not have been safe. Nor are we now. We have seen the enemy, after all, and he is us. The snake inhabits each of our souls. This is the reason, as far as I can tell, for the strange Christian insistence, made most explicit by John Milton, that the snake in the Garden of Eden was also Satan, the Spirit of Evil itself. The importance of this symbolic identification—its staggering brilliance—can hardly be overstated. It is through such millennia-long exercise of the imagination that the idea of abstracted moral concepts themselves, with all they entail, developed. Work beyond comprehension was invested into the idea of Good and Evil, and its

surrounding, dream-like metaphor. *The worst of all possible snakes is the eternal human proclivity for evil*. The worst of all possible snakes is *psychological, spiritual, personal, internal*. No walls, however tall, will keep that out. Even if the fortress were thick enough, in principle, to keep everything bad whatsoever outside, it would immediately appear again within. As the great Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn insisted, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.[48]

There is simply no way to wall off some isolated portion of the greater surrounding reality and make everything permanently predictable and safe within it. Some of what has been no-matter-how-carefully excluded will always sneak back in. A serpent, metaphorically speaking, will inevitably appear. Even the most assiduous of parents cannot fully protect their children, even if they lock them in the basement, safely away from drugs, alcohol and internet porn. In that extreme case, the too-cautious, too-caring parent merely substitutes him or herself for the other terrible problems of life. This is the great Freudian Oedipal nightmare.[49] *It is far better to render Beings in your care competent than to protect them*.

And even if it were possible to permanently banish everything threatening —everything dangerous (and, therefore, everything challenging and interesting), that would mean only that another danger would emerge: that of permanent human infantilism and absolute uselessness. How could the nature of man ever reach its full potential without challenge and danger? How dull and contemptible would we become if there was no longer reason to pay attention? Maybe God thought His new creation would be able to handle the serpent, and considered its presence the lesser of two evils.

Question for parents: do you want to make your children safe, or strong?

In any case, there's a serpent in the Garden, and he's a "subtil" beast, according to the ancient story (difficult to see, vaporous, cunning, deceitful and treacherous). It therefore comes as no surprise when he decides to play a trick on Eve. Why Eve, instead of Adam? It could just be chance. It was fifty-fifty for Eve, statistically speaking, and those are pretty high odds. But I have learned that these old stories contain nothing superfluous. Anything accidental—anything that does not serve the plot—has long been forgotten in the telling. As the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov advised, "If there is a rifle hanging on the wall in act one, it must be fired in the next act. Otherwise

it has no business being there."[50] Perhaps primordial Eve had more reason to attend to serpents than Adam. Maybe they were more likely, for example, to prey on her tree-dwelling infants. Perhaps it is for this reason that Eve's daughters are more protective, self-conscious, fearful and nervous, to this day (even, and especially, in the most egalitarian of modern human societies[51]). In any case, the serpent tells Eve that if she eats the forbidden fruit, she won't die. Instead, her eyes will be opened. She will become like God, knowing good from evil. Of course, the serpent doesn't let her know she will be like God in only that one way. But he is a serpent, after all. Being human, and wanting to know more, Eve decides to eat the fruit. Poof! She wakes up: she's conscious, or perhaps self-conscious, for the first time.

Now, no clear-seeing, conscious woman is going to tolerate an unawakened man. So, Eve immediately shares the fruit with Adam. That makes *him* self-conscious. Little has changed. Women have been making men self-conscious since the beginning of time. They do this primarily by rejecting them—but they also do it by shaming them, if men do not take responsibility. Since women bear the primary burden of reproduction, it's no wonder. It is very hard to see how it could be otherwise. But the capacity of women to shame men and render them self-conscious is still a primal force of nature.

Now, you may ask: what in the world have snakes got to do with vision? Well, first, it's clearly of some importance to *see* them, because they might prey on you (particularly when you're little and live in trees, like our arboreal ancestors). Dr. Lynn Isbell, professor of anthropology and animal behaviour at the University of California, has suggested that the stunningly acute vision almost uniquely possessed by human beings was an adaptation forced on us tens of millions of years ago by the necessity of detecting and avoiding the terrible danger of snakes, with whom our ancestors co-evolved.[52] This is perhaps one of the reasons the snake features in the garden of Paradise as the creature who gave us the vision of God (in addition to serving as the primordial and eternal enemy of mankind). This is perhaps one of the reasons why Mary, the eternal, archetypal mother—Eve perfected—is so commonly shown in medieval and Renaissance iconography holding the Christ Child in the air, as far away as possible from a predatory reptile, which she has firmly pinned under her foot.[53] And there's more. It's fruit that the snake offers, and

fruit is also associated with a transformation of vision, in that our ability to see color is an adaptation that allows us to rapidly detect the ripe and therefore edible bounty of trees.[54]

Our primordial parents hearkened to the snake. They ate the fruit. Their eyes opened. They both awoke. You might think, as Eve did initially, that this would be a good thing. Sometimes, however, half a gift is worse than none. Adam and Eve wake up, all right, but only enough to discover some terrible things. First, they notice that they're naked.

The Naked Ape

My son figured out that he was naked well before he was three. He wanted to dress himself. He kept the washroom door firmly shut. He didn't appear in public without his clothes. I couldn't for the life of me see how this had anything to do with his upbringing. It was his own discovery, his own realization, and his own choice of reactions. It looked built in, to me.

What does it mean to know yourself naked—or, potentially worse, to know yourself and your partner naked? All manner of terrible things—expressed in the rather horrifying manner, for example, of the Renaissance painter Hans Baldung Grien, whose painting inspired the illustration that begins this chapter. Naked means vulnerable and easily damaged. Naked means subject to judgment for beauty and health. Naked means unprotected and unarmed in the jungle of nature and man. This is why Adam and Eve became ashamed, immediately after their eyes were opened. They could see—and what they first saw was themselves. Their faults stood out. Their vulnerability was on display. Unlike other mammals, whose delicate abdomens are protected by the armour-like expanse of their backs, they were upright creatures, with the most vulnerable parts of their body presented to the world. And worse was to come. Adam and Eve made themselves loincloths (in the International Standard Version; aprons in the King James Version) right away, to cover up their fragile bodies—and to protect their egos. Then they promptly skittered off and hid. In their vulnerability, now fully realized, they felt unworthy to stand before God.

If you can't identify with that sentiment, you're just not thinking. Beauty shames the ugly. Strength shames the weak. Death shames the living—and the Ideal shames us all. Thus we fear it, resent it—even hate it (and, of

course, that's the theme next examined in Genesis, in the story of Cain and Abel). What are we to do about that? Abandon all ideals of beauty, health, brilliance and strength? That's not a good solution. That would merely ensure that we would feel ashamed, all the time—and that we would even more justly deserve it. I don't want women who can stun by their mere presence to disappear just so that others can feel unselfconscious. I don't want intellects such as John von Neumann's to vanish, just because of my barely-grade-twelve grasp of mathematics. By the time he was nineteen, he had redefined numbers.[55] Numbers! Thank God for John von Neumann! Thank God for Grace Kelly and Anita Ekberg and Monica Bellucci! I'm proud to feel unworthy in the presence of people like that. It's the price we all pay for aim, achievement and ambition. But it's also no wonder that Adam and Eve covered themselves up.

The next part of the story is downright farcical, in my opinion, although it's also tragic and terrible. That evening, when Eden cools down, God goes out for His evening stroll. But Adam is absent. This puzzles God, who is accustomed to walking with him. "Adam," calls God, apparently forgetting that He can see through bushes, "Where are you?" Adam immediately reveals himself, but badly: first as a neurotic; then, as a ratfink. The creator of all the universe calls, and Adam replies: "I heard you, God. But I was naked, and hid." What does this mean? It means that people, unsettled by their vulnerability, eternally fear to tell the truth, to mediate between chaos and order, and to manifest their destiny. In other words, they are afraid to walk with God. That's not particularly admirable, perhaps, but it's certainly understandable. God's a judgmental father. His standards are high. He's hard to please.

God says, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat something you weren't supposed to?" And Adam, in his wretchedness, points right at Eve, his love, his partner, his soul-mate, and snitches on her. And then he blames God. He says, "The woman, whom you gave to me, she gave it to me (and then I ate it)." How pathetic—and how accurate. The first woman made the first man self-conscious and resentful. Then the first man blamed the woman. And then the first man blamed God. This is exactly how every spurned male feels, to this day. First, he feels small, in front of the potential object of his love, after she denigrates his reproductive suitability. Then he curses God for

making her so bitchy, himself so useless (if he has any sense) and Being itself so deeply flawed. Then he turns to thoughts of revenge. How thoroughly contemptible (and how utterly understandable). At least the woman had the serpent to blame, and it later turns out that snake is Satan himself, unlikely as that seems. Thus, we can understand and sympathize with Eve's error. She was deceived by the best. But Adam! No one forced his words from his mouth.

Unfortunately, the worst isn't over—for Man or Beast. First, God curses the serpent, telling him that he will now have to slither around, legless, forever in peril of being stomped on by angry humans. Second, He tells the woman that she will now bring forth children in sorrow, and desire an unworthy, sometimes resentful man, who will in consequence lord her biological fate over her, permanently. What might this mean? It could just mean that God is a patriarchal tyrant, as politically motivated interpretations of the ancient story insist. I think it's—merely descriptive. Merely. And here is why: As human beings evolved, the brains that eventually gave rise to self-consciousness expanded tremendously. This produced an evolutionary arms race between fetal head and female pelvis.[56] The female graciously widened her hips, almost to the point where running would no longer be possible. The baby, for his part, allowed himself to be born more than a year early, compared to other mammals of his size, and evolved a semi-collapsible head.[57] This was and is a painful adjustment for both. The essentially fetal baby is almost completely dependent on his mother for everything during that first year. The programmability of his massive brain means that he must be trained until he is eighteen (or thirty) before being pushed out of the nest. This is to say nothing of the woman's consequential pain in childbirth, and high risk of death for mother and infant alike. This all means that women pay a high price for pregnancy and child-rearing, particularly in the early stages, and that one of the inevitable consequences is increased dependence upon the sometimes unreliable and always problematic good graces of men.

After God tells Eve what is going to happen, now that she has awakened, He turns to Adam—who, along with his male descendants, doesn't get off any easier. God says something akin to this: "Man, because you attended to the woman, your eyes have been opened. Your godlike vision, granted to you by snake, fruit and lover, allows you to see far, even into the future. But those

who see into the future can also eternally see trouble coming, and must then prepare for all contingencies and possibilities. To do that, you will have to eternally sacrifice the present for the future. You must put aside pleasure for security. In short: you will have to work. And it's going to be difficult. I hope you're fond of thorns and thistles, because you're going to grow a lot of them."

And then God banishes the first man and the first woman from Paradise, out of infancy, out of the unconscious animal world, into the horrors of history itself. And then He puts cherubim and a flaming sword at the gate of Eden, just to stop them from eating the Fruit of the Tree of Life. That, in particular, appears rather mean-spirited. Why not just make the poor humans immortal, right away? Particularly if that is your plan for the ultimate future, anyway, as the story goes? But who would dare to question God?

Perhaps Heaven is something you must build, and immortality something you must earn.

And so we return to our original query: Why would someone buy prescription medication for his dog, and then so carefully administer it, when he would not do the same for himself? Now you have the answer, derived from one of the foundational texts of mankind. Why should anyone take care of anything as naked, ugly, ashamed, frightened, worthless, cowardly, resentful, defensive and accusatory as a descendant of Adam? Even if that thing, that being, is himself? And I do not mean at all to exclude women with this phrasing.

All the reasons we have discussed so far for taking a dim view of humanity are applicable to others, as much as to the self. They're generalizations about human nature; nothing more specific. But you know so much more about yourself. You're bad enough, as other people know you. But only you know the full range of your secret transgressions, insufficiencies and inadequacies. No one is more familiar than you with all the ways your mind and body are flawed. No one has more reason to hold you in contempt, to see you as pathetic—and by withholding something that might do you good, you can punish yourself for all your failings. A dog, a harmless, innocent, unselfconscious dog, is clearly more deserving.

But if you are not yet convinced, let us consider another vital issue. Order, chaos, life, death, sin, vision, work and suffering: that is not enough for the authors of Genesis, nor for humanity itself. The story continues, in all its

catastrophe and tragedy, and the people involved (that's us) must contend with yet another painful awakening. We are next fated to contemplate morality itself.

Good and Evil

When their eyes are opened, Adam and Eve realize more than just their nakedness and the necessity of toil. They also come to know Good and Evil (the serpent says, referring to the fruit, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil"). What could that possibly mean? What could be left to explore and relate, after the vast ground already covered? Well, simple context indicates that it must have something to do with gardens, snakes, disobedience, fruit, sexuality and nakedness. It was the last item—nakedness—that finally clued me in. It took years.

Dogs are predators. So are cats. They kill things and eat them. It's not pretty. But we'll take them as pets and care for them, and give them their medication when they're sick, regardless. Why? They're predators, but it's just their nature. They do not bear responsibility for it. They're hungry, not evil. They don't have the presence of mind, the creativity—and, above all, the self-consciousness—necessary for the inspired cruelty of man.

Why not? It's simple. Unlike us, predators have no comprehension of their fundamental weakness, their fundamental vulnerability, their own subjugation to pain and death. But we know exactly how and where we can be hurt, and why. That is as good a definition as any of self-consciousness. We are aware of our own defencelessness, finitude and mortality. We can feel pain, and self-disgust, and shame, and horror, and we know it. We know what makes us suffer. We know how dread and pain can be inflicted on us—and that means we know exactly how to inflict it on others. We know how we are naked, and how that nakedness can be exploited—and that means we know how others are naked, and how they can be exploited.

We can terrify other people, consciously. We can hurt and humiliate them for faults we understand only too well. We can torture them—literally—slowly, artfully and terribly. That's far more than predation. That's a qualitative shift in understanding. That's a cataclysm as large as the development of self-consciousness itself. That's the entry of the knowledge

of Good and Evil into the world. That's a second as-yet-unhealed fracture in the structure of Existence. That's the transformation of Being itself into a moral endeavour—all attendant on the development of sophisticated self-consciousness.

Only man could conceive of the rack, the iron maiden and the thumbscrew. Only man will inflict suffering for the sake of suffering. That is the best definition of evil I have been able to formulate. Animals can't manage that, but humans, with their excruciating, semi-divine capacities, most certainly can. And with this realization we have well-nigh full legitimization of the idea, very unpopular in modern intellectual circles, of Original Sin. And who would dare to say that there was no element of voluntary choice in our evolutionary, individual and theological transformation? Our ancestors chose their sexual partners, and they selected for—consciousness? And self-consciousness? And moral knowledge? And who can deny the sense of existential guilt that pervades human experience? And who could avoid noting that without that guilt—that sense of inbuilt corruption and capacity for wrongdoing—a man is one step from psychopathy?

Human beings have a great capacity for wrongdoing. It's an attribute that is unique in the world of life. We can and do make things worse, voluntarily, with full knowledge of what we are doing (as well as accidentally, and carelessly, and in a manner that is willfully blind). Given that terrible capacity, that proclivity for malevolent actions, is it any wonder we have a hard time taking care of ourselves, or others—or even that we doubt the value of the entire human enterprise? And we've suspected ourselves, for good reason, for a very long time. Thousands of years ago, the ancient Mesopotamians believed, for example, that mankind itself was made from the blood of Kingu, the single most terrible monster that the great Goddess of Chaos could produce, in her most vengeful and destructive moments.[58] After drawing conclusions such as that, how could we not question the value of our being, and even of Being itself? Who then could be faced with illness, in himself or another, without doubting the moral utility of prescribing a healing medicament? And no one understands the darkness of the individual better than the individual himself. Who, then, when ill, is going to be fully committed to his own care?

Perhaps Man is something that should never have been. Perhaps the world should even be cleansed of all human presence, so that Being and consciousness could return to the innocent brutality of the animal. I believe that the person who claims never to have wished for such a thing has neither consulted his memory nor confronted his darkest fantasies.

What then is to be done?

A Spark of the Divine

In Genesis 1, God creates the world with the divine, truthful Word, generating habitable, paradisal order from the precosmogonic chaos. He then creates Man and Woman in His Image, imbuing them with the capacity to do the same—to create order from chaos, and continue His work. At each stage of creation, including that involving the formation of the first couple, God reflects upon what has come to be, and pronounces it Good.

The juxtaposition of Genesis 1 with Genesis 2 & 3 (the latter two chapters outlining the fall of man, describing why our lot is so tragedy-ridden and ethically torturous) produces a narrative sequence almost unbearable in its profundity. The moral of Genesis 1 is that Being brought into existence through true speech is Good. This is true even of man himself, prior to his separation from God. This goodness is terribly disrupted by the events of the fall (and of Cain and Abel and the Flood and the Tower of Babel), but we retain an intimation of the prelapsarian state. We remember, so to speak. We remain eternally nostalgic for the innocence of childhood, the divine, unconscious Being of the animal, and the untouched cathedral-like old-growth forest. We find respite in such things. We worship them, even if we are self-proclaimed atheistic environmentalists of the most anti-human sort. The original state of Nature, conceived in this manner, is paradisal. But we are no longer one with God and Nature, and there is no simple turning back.

The original Man and Woman, existing in unbroken unity with their Creator, did not appear conscious (and certainly not self-conscious). Their eyes were not open. But, in their perfection, they were also less, not more, than their post-Fall counterparts. Their goodness was something bestowed, rather than deserved or earned. They exercised no choice. God knows, that’s easier. But maybe it’s not better than, for example, goodness genuinely earned. Maybe, even in some cosmic sense (assuming that consciousness

itself is a phenomenon of cosmic significance), free choice matters. Who can speak with certainty about such things? I am unwilling to take these questions off the table, however, merely because they are difficult. So, here's a proposition: perhaps it is not simply the emergence of self-consciousness and the rise of our moral knowledge of Death and the Fall that besets us and makes us doubt our own worth. Perhaps it is instead our unwillingness—reflected in Adam's shamed hiding—to walk with God, despite our fragility and propensity for evil.

The entire Bible is structured so that everything after the Fall—the history of Israel, the prophets, the coming of Christ—is presented as a remedy for that Fall, a way out of evil. The beginning of conscious history, the rise of the state and all its pathologies of pride and rigidity, the emergence of great moral figures who try to set things right, culminating in the Messiah Himself—that is all part of humanity's attempt, God willing, to set itself right. And what would that mean?

And this is an amazing thing: the answer is already implicit in Genesis 1: to embody the Image of God—to speak out of chaos the Being that is Good—but to do so consciously, of our own free choice. *Back* is the way forward—as T. S. Eliot so rightly insisted—but back as awake beings, exercising the proper choice of awake beings, instead of back to sleep:

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*
> *Through the unknown, remembered gate*
> *When the last of earth left to discover*
> *Is that which was the beginning;*
> *At the source of the longest river*
> *The voice of the hidden waterfall*
> *And the children in the apple-tree*
>
> *Not known, because not looked for*
> *But heard, half-heard, in the stillness*
> *Between two waves of the sea.*
> *Quick now, here, now, always—*
> *A condition of complete simplicity*
> *(Costing not less than everything)*
> *And all shall be well and*
> *All manner of things shall be well*
> *When the tongues of flames are in-folded*
> *Into the crowned knot of fire*

And the fire and the rose are one.
("Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*, 1943)

If we wish to take care of ourselves properly, we would have to respect ourselves—but we don't, because we are—not least in our own eyes—fallen creatures. If we lived in Truth; if we spoke the Truth—then we could walk with God once again, and respect ourselves, and others, and the world. Then we might treat ourselves like people we cared for. We might strive to set the world straight. We might orient it toward Heaven, where we would want people we cared for to dwell, instead of Hell, where our resentment and hatred would eternally sentence everyone.

In the areas where Christianity emerged two thousand years ago, people were much more barbaric than they are today. Conflict was everywhere. Human sacrifice, including that of children, was a common occurrence even in technologically sophisticated societies, such as that of ancient Carthage.[59] In Rome, arena sports were competitions to the death, and the spilling of blood was a commonplace. The probability that a modern person, in a functional democratic country, will now kill or be killed is infinitesimally low compared to what it was in previous societies (and still is, in the unorganized and anarchic parts of the world).[60] Then, the primary moral issue confronting society was control of violent, impulsive selfishness and the mindless greed and brutality that accompanies it. People with those aggressive tendencies still exist. At least now they know that such behaviour is sub-optimal, and either try to control it or encounter major social obstacles if they don't.

But now, also, another problem has arisen, which was perhaps less common in our harsher past. It is easy to believe that people are arrogant, and egotistical, and always looking out for themselves. The cynicism that makes that opinion a universal truism is widespread and fashionable. But such an orientation to the world is not at all characteristic of many people. They have the opposite problem: they shoulder intolerable burdens of self-disgust, self-contempt, shame and self-consciousness. Thus, instead of narcissistically inflating their own importance, they don't value themselves at all, and they don't take care of themselves with attention and skill. It seems that people often don't really believe that they deserve the best care, personally speaking. They are excruciatingly aware of their own faults and inadequacies, real and exaggerated, and ashamed and doubtful of their own value. They believe that

other people shouldn't suffer, and they will work diligently and altruistically to help them alleviate it. They extend the same courtesy even to the animals they are acquainted with—but not so easily to themselves.

It is true that the idea of virtuous self-sacrifice is deeply embedded in Western culture (at least insofar as the West has been influenced by Christianity, which is based on the imitation of someone who performed the ultimate act of self-sacrifice). Any claim that the Golden Rule does not mean "sacrifice yourself for others" might therefore appear dubious. But Christ's archetypal death exists as an example of how to accept finitude, betrayal and tyranny heroically—how to walk with God despite the tragedy of self-conscious knowledge—and not as a directive to victimize ourselves in the service of others. To sacrifice ourselves to God (to the highest good, if you like) does not mean to suffer silently and willingly when some person or organization demands more from us, consistently, than is offered in return. That means we are supporting tyranny, and allowing ourselves to be treated like slaves. It is not virtuous to be victimized by a bully, even if that bully is oneself.

I learned two very important lessons from Carl Jung, the famous Swiss depth psychologist, about "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you" or "loving your neighbour as yourself." The first lesson was that neither of these statements has anything to do with being nice. The second was that both are equations, rather than injunctions. If I am someone's friend, family member, or lover, then I am morally obliged to bargain as hard on my own behalf as they are on theirs. If I fail to do so, I will end up a slave, and the other person a tyrant. What good is that? It much better for any relationship when both partners are strong. Furthermore, there is little difference between standing up and speaking for yourself, when you are being bullied or otherwise tormented and enslaved, and standing up and speaking for someone else. As Jung points out, this means embracing and loving the sinner who is yourself, as much as forgiving and aiding someone else who is stumbling and imperfect.

As God himself claims (so goes the story), "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." According to this philosophy, you do not simply belong to yourself. You are not simply your own possession to torture and mistreat. This is partly because your Being is inexorably tied up with that of others, and your mistreatment of yourself can have catastrophic consequences

for others. This is most clearly evident, perhaps, in the aftermath of suicide, when those left behind are often both bereft and traumatized. But, metaphorically speaking, there is also this: you have a spark of the divine in you, which belongs not to you, but to God. We are, after all—according to Genesis—made in His image. We have the semi-divine capacity for consciousness. Our consciousness participates in the speaking forth of Being. We are low-resolution ("kenotic") versions of God. We can make order from chaos—and vice versa—in our way, with our words. So, we may not exactly be God, but we're not exactly nothing, either.

In my own periods of darkness, in the underworld of the soul, I find myself frequently overcome and amazed by the ability of people to befriend each other, to love their intimate partners and parents and children, and to do what they must do to keep the machinery of the world running. I knew a man, injured and disabled by a car accident, who was employed by a local utility. For years after the crash he worked side by side with another man, who for his part suffered with a degenerative neurological disease. They cooperated while repairing the lines, each making up for the other's inadequacy. This sort of everyday heroism is the rule, I believe, rather than the exception. Most individuals are dealing with one or more serious health problems while going productively and uncomplainingly about their business. If anyone is fortunate enough to be in a rare period of grace and health, personally, then he or she typically has at least one close family member in crisis. Yet people prevail and continue to do difficult and effortful tasks to hold themselves and their families and society together. To me this is miraculous—so much so that a dumbfounded gratitude is the only appropriate response. There are so many ways that things can fall apart, or fail to work altogether, and it is always wounded people who are holding it together. They deserve some genuine and heartfelt admiration for that. It's an ongoing miracle of fortitude and perseverance.

In my clinical practice I encourage people to credit themselves and those around them for acting productively and with care, as well as for the genuine concern and thoughtfulness they manifest towards others. People are so tortured by the limitations and constraint of Being that I am amazed they ever act properly or look beyond themselves at all. But enough do so that we have central heat and running water and infinite computational power and electricity and enough for everyone to eat and even the capacity to

contemplate the fate of broader society and nature, terrible nature, itself. All that complex machinery that protects us from freezing and starving and dying from lack of water tends unceasingly towards malfunction through entropy, and it is only the constant attention of careful people that keeps it working so unbelievably well. Some people degenerate into the hell of resentment and the hatred of Being, but most refuse to do so, despite their suffering and disappointments and losses and inadequacies and ugliness, and again that is a miracle for those with the eyes to see it.

Humanity, in toto, and those who compose it as identifiable people deserve some sympathy for the appalling burden under which the human individual genuinely staggers; some sympathy for subjugation to mortal vulnerability, tyranny of the state, and the depredations of nature. It is an existential situation that no mere animal encounters or endures, and one of severity such that it would take a God to fully bear it. It is this sympathy that should be the proper medicament for self-conscious self-contempt, which has its justification, but is only half the full and proper story. Hatred for self and mankind must be balanced with gratefulness for tradition and the state and astonishment at what normal, everyday people accomplish—to say nothing of the staggering achievements of the truly remarkable.

We deserve some respect. You deserve some respect. You are important to other people, as much as to yourself. You have some vital role to play in the unfolding destiny of the world. You are, therefore, morally obliged to take care of yourself. You should take care of, help and be good to yourself the same way you would take care of, help and be good to someone you loved and valued. You may therefore have to conduct yourself habitually in a manner that allows you some respect for your own Being—and fair enough. But every person is deeply flawed. Everyone falls short of the glory of God. If that stark fact meant, however, that we had no responsibility to care, for ourselves as much as others, everyone would be brutally punished all the time. That would not be good. That would make the shortcomings of the world, which can make everyone who thinks honestly question the very propriety of the world, worse in every way. That simply cannot be the proper path forward.

To treat yourself as if you were someone you are responsible for helping is, instead, to consider what would be truly good for you. This is not "what you want." It is also not "what would make you happy." Every time you give

a child something sweet, you make that child happy. That does not mean that you should do nothing for children except feed them candy. “Happy” is by no means synonymous with “good.” You must get children to brush their teeth. They must put on their snowsuits when they go outside in the cold, even though they might object strenuously. You must help a child become a virtuous, responsible, awake being, capable of full reciprocity—able to take care of himself and others, and to thrive while doing so. Why would you think it acceptable to do anything less for yourself?

You need to consider the future and think, “What might my life look like if I were caring for myself properly? What career would challenge me and render me productive and helpful, so that I could shoulder my share of the load, and enjoy the consequences? What should I be doing, when I have some freedom, to improve my health, expand my knowledge, and strengthen my body?” You need to know where you are, so you can start to chart your course. You need to know who you are, so that you understand your armament and bolster yourself in respect to your limitations. You need to know where you are going, so that you can limit the extent of chaos in your life, restructure order, and bring the divine force of Hope to bear on the world.

You must determine where you are going, so that you can bargain for yourself, so that you don’t end up resentful, vengeful and cruel. You have to articulate your own principles, so that you can defend yourself against others’ taking inappropriate advantage of you, and so that you are secure and safe while you work and play. You must discipline yourself carefully. You must keep the promises you make to yourself, and reward yourself, so that you can trust and motivate yourself. You need to determine how to act toward yourself so that you are most likely to become and to stay a good person. It would be good to make the world a better place. Heaven, after all, will not arrive of its own accord. We will have to work to bring it about, and strengthen ourselves, so that we can withstand the deadly angels and flaming sword of judgment that God used to bar its entrance.

Don’t underestimate the power of vision and direction. These are irresistible forces, able to transform what might appear to be unconquerable obstacles into traversable pathways and expanding opportunities. Strengthen the individual. Start with yourself. Take care with yourself. Define who you are. Refine your personality. Choose your destination and articulate your

Being. As the great nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche so brilliantly noted, “He whose life has a why can bear almost any how.”[61]

You could help direct the world, on its careening trajectory, a bit more toward Heaven and a bit more away from Hell. Once having understood Hell, researched it, so to speak—particularly your own individual Hell—you could decide against going there or creating that. You could aim elsewhere. You could, in fact, devote your life to this. That would give you a Meaning, with a capital M. That would justify your miserable existence. That would atone for your sinful nature, and replace your shame and self-consciousness with the natural pride and forthright confidence of someone who has learned once again to walk with God in the Garden.

You could begin by treating yourself as if you were someone you were responsible for helping.

RULE 3

MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO WANT THE BEST FOR YOU

THE OLD HOMETOWN

The town I grew up in had been scraped only fifty years earlier out of the endless flat Northern prairie. Fairview, Alberta, was part of the frontier, and had the cowboy bars to prove it. The Hudson's Bay Co. department store on Main Street still bought beaver, wolf and coyote furs directly from the local trappers. Three thousand people lived there, four hundred miles away from the nearest city. Cable TV, video games and internet did not exist. It was no easy matter to stay innocently amused in Fairview, particularly during the five months of winter, when long stretches of forty-below days and even colder nights were the norm.

The world is a different place when it's cold like that. The drunks in our town ended their sad lives early. They passed out in snowbanks at three in the morning and froze to death. You don't go outside casually when it's forty below. On first breath, the arid desert air constricts your lungs. Ice forms on your eyelashes and they stick together. Long hair, wet from the shower, freezes solid and then stands on end wraith-like of its own accord later in a warm house, when it thaws bone dry, charged with electricity. Children only put their tongues on steel playground equipment once. Smoke from house chimneys doesn't rise. Defeated by the cold, it drifts downwards, and collects like fog on snow-covered rooftops and yards. Cars must be plugged in at night, their engines warmed by block heaters, or oil will not flow through them in the morning, and they won't start. Sometimes they won't anyway. Then you turn the engine over pointlessly until the starter clatters and falls silent. Then you remove the frozen battery from the car, loosening bolts with stiffening fingers in the intense cold, and bring it into the house. It sits there, sweating for hours, until it warms enough to hold a decent charge. You are not going to see out of the back window of your car, either. It frosts over in

November and stays that way until May. Scraping it off just dampens the upholstery. Then it's frozen, too. Late one night going to visit a friend I sat for two hours on the edge of the passenger seat in a 1970 Dodge Challenger, jammed up against the stick-shift, using a vodka-soaked rag to keep the inside of the front windshield clear in front of the driver because the car heater had quit. Stopping wasn't an option. There was nowhere to stop.

And it was hell on house cats. Felines in Fairview had short ears and tails because they had lost the tips of both to frostbite. They came to resemble Arctic foxes, which evolved those features to deal proactively with the intense cold. One day our cat got outside and no one noticed. We found him, later, fur frozen fast to the cold hard backdoor cement steps where he sat. We carefully separated cat from concrete, with no lasting damage—except to his pride. Fairview cats were also at great risk in the winter from cars, but not for the reasons you think. It wasn't automobiles sliding on icy roads and running them over. Only loser cats died that way. It was cars parked immediately after being driven that were dangerous. A frigid cat might think highly of climbing up under such a vehicle and sitting on its still-warm engine block. But what if the driver decided to use the car again, before the engine cooled down and cat departed? Let's just say that heat-seeking house-pets and rapidly rotating radiator fans do not coexist happily.

Because we were so far north, the bitterly cold winters were also very dark. By December, the sun didn't rise until 9:30 a.m. We trudged to school in the pitch black. It wasn't much lighter when we walked home, just before the early sunset. There wasn't much for young people to do in Fairview, even in the summer. But the winters were worse. Then your friends mattered. More than anything.

My Friend Chris and His Cousin

I had a friend at that time. We'll call him Chris. He was a smart guy. He read a lot. He liked science fiction of the kind I was attracted to (Bradbury, Heinlein, Clarke). He was inventive. He was interested in electronic kits and gears and motors. He was a natural engineer. All this was overshadowed, however, by something that had gone wrong in his family. I don't know what it was. His sisters were smart and his father was soft-spoken and his mother was kind. The girls seemed OK. But Chris had been left unattended to in

some important way. Despite his intelligence and curiosity he was angry, resentful and without hope.

All this manifested itself in material form in the shape of his 1972 blue Ford pickup truck. That notorious vehicle had at least one dent in every quarter panel of its damaged external body. Worse, it had an equivalent number of dents inside. Those were produced by the impact of the body parts of friends against the internal surfaces during the continual accidents that resulted in the outer dents. Chris's truck was the exoskeleton of a nihilist. It had the perfect bumper sticker: *Be Alert—The World Needs More Lerts*. The irony it produced in combination with the dents elevated it nicely to theatre of the absurd. Very little of that was (so to speak) accidental.

Every time Chris crashed his truck, his father would fix it, and buy him something else. He had a motorbike and a van for selling ice cream. He did not care for his motorbike. He sold no ice cream. He often expressed dissatisfaction with his father and their relationship. But his dad was older and unwell, diagnosed with an illness only after many years. He didn't have the energy he should have. Maybe he couldn't pay enough attention to his son. Maybe that's all it took to fracture their relationship.

Chris had a cousin, Ed, who was about two years younger. I liked him, as much as you can like the younger cousin of a teenage friend. He was a tall, smart, charming, good-looking kid. He was witty, too. You would have predicted a good future for him, had you met him when he was twelve. But Ed drifted slowly downhill, into a dropout, semi-drifting mode of existence. He didn't get as angry as Chris, but he was just as confused. If you knew Ed's friends, you might say that it was peer pressure that set him on his downward path. But his peers weren't obviously any more lost or delinquent than he was, although they were generally somewhat less bright. It was also the case that Ed's—and Chris's—situation did not appear particularly improved by their discovery of marijuana. Marijuana isn't bad for everyone any more than alcohol is bad for everyone. Sometimes it even appears to improve people. But it didn't improve Ed. It didn't improve Chris, either.

To amuse ourselves in the long nights, Chris and I and Ed and the rest of the teenagers drove around and around in our 1970s cars and pickup trucks. We cruised down Main Street, along Railroad Avenue, up past the high school, around the north end of town, over to the west—or up Main Street, around the north end of town, over to the east—and so on, endlessly

repeating the theme. If we weren’t driving in town, we were driving in the countryside. A century earlier, surveyors had laid out a vast grid across the entire three-hundred-thousand-square-mile expanse of the great western prairie. Every two miles north, a plowed gravel road stretched forever, east to west. Every mile west, another travelled north and south. We never ran out of roads.

Teenage Wasteland

If we weren’t circling around town and countryside we were at a party. Some relatively young adult (or some relatively creepy older adult) would open his house to friends. It would then become temporary home to all manner of party crashers, many of whom started out seriously undesirable or quickly become that way when drinking. A party might also happen accidentally, when some teenager’s unwitting parents had left town. In that case, the occupants of the cars or trucks always cruising around would notice house lights on, but household car absent. This was not good. Things could get seriously out of hand.

I did not like teenage parties. I do not remember them nostalgically. They were dismal affairs. The lights were kept low. That kept self-consciousness to a minimum. The over-loud music made conversation impossible. There was little to talk about in any case. There were always a couple of the town psychopaths attending. Everybody drank and smoked too much. A dreary and oppressive sense of aimlessness hung over such occasions, and nothing ever happened (unless you count the time my too-quiet classmate drunkenly began to brandish his fully-loaded 12-gauge shotgun, or the time the girl I later married contemptuously insulted someone while he threatened her with a knife, or the time another friend climbed a large tree, swung out on a branch, and crashed flat onto his back, half dead right beside the campfire we had started at its base, followed precisely one minute later by his halfwit sidekick).

No one knew what the hell they were doing at those parties. Hoping for a cheerleader? Waiting for Godot? Although the former would have been immediately preferred (although cheerleading squads were scarce in our town), the latter was closer to the truth. It would be more romantic, I suppose, to suggest that we would have all jumped at the chance for something more

productive, bored out of our skulls as we were. But it's not true. We were all too prematurely cynical and world-weary and leery of responsibility to stick to the debating clubs and Air Cadets and school sports that the adults around us tried to organize. Doing *anything* wasn't cool. I don't know what teenage life was like before the revolutionaries of the late sixties advised everyone young to tune in, turn on and drop out. Was it OK for a teenager to belong wholeheartedly to a club in 1955? Because it certainly wasn't twenty years later. Plenty of us turned on and dropped out. But not so many tuned in.

I wanted to be elsewhere. I wasn't the only one. Everyone who eventually left the Fairview I grew up in knew they were leaving by the age of twelve. I knew. My wife, who grew up with me on the street our families shared, knew. The friends I had who did and didn't leave also knew, regardless of which track they were on. There was an unspoken expectation in the families of those who were college-bound that such a thing was a matter of course. For those from less-educated families, a future that included university was simply not part of the conceptual realm. It wasn't for lack of money, either. Tuition for advanced education was very low at that time, and jobs in Alberta were plentiful and high-paying. I earned more money in 1980 working at a plywood mill than I would again doing anything else for twenty years. No one missed out on university because of financial need in oil-rich Alberta in the 1970s.

Some Different Friends—and Some More of the Same

In high school, after my first group of cronies had all dropped out, I made friends with a couple of newcomers. They came to Fairview as boarders. There was no school after ninth grade in their even more remote and aptly named hometown, Bear Canyon. They were an ambitious duo, comparatively speaking; straightforward and reliable, but also cool and very amusing. When I left town to attend Grande Prairie Regional College, ninety miles away, one of them became my roommate. The other went off elsewhere to pursue further education. Both were aiming upward. Their decisions to do so bolstered mine.

I was a happy clam when I arrived at college. I found another, expanded group of like-minded companions, whom my Bear Canyon comrade also joined. We were all captivated by literature and philosophy. We ran the

Student Union. We made it profitable, for the first time in its history, hosting college dances. How can you lose money selling beer to college kids? We started a newspaper. We got to know our professors of political science and biology and English literature in the tiny seminars that characterized even our first year. The instructors were thankful for our enthusiasm and taught us well. We were building a better life.

I sloughed off a lot of my past. In a small town, everyone knows who you are. You drag your years behind you like a running dog with tin cans tied to its tail. You can't escape who you have been. Everything wasn't online then, and thank God for that, but it was stored equally indelibly in everyone's spoken and unspoken expectations and memory.

When you move, everything is up in the air, at least for a while. It's stressful, but in the chaos there are new possibilities. People, including you, can't hem you in with their old notions. You get shaken out of your ruts. You can make new, better ruts, with people aiming at better things. I thought this was just a natural development. I thought that every person who moved would have—and want—the same phoenix-like experience. But that wasn't always the case.

One time, when I was about fifteen, I went with Chris and another friend, Carl, to Edmonton, a city of six hundred thousand. Carl had never been to a city. This was not uncommon. Fairview to Edmonton was an eight-hundred-mile round trip. I had done it many times, sometimes with my parents, sometimes without. I liked the anonymity that the city provided. I liked the new beginnings. I liked the escape from the dismal, cramped adolescent culture of my home town. So, I convinced my two friends to make the journey. But they did not have the same experience. As soon as we arrived, Chris and Carl wanted to buy some pot. We headed for the parts of Edmonton that were exactly like the worst of Fairview. We found the same furtive street-vending marijuana providers. We spent the weekend drinking in the hotel room. Although we had travelled a long distance, we had gone nowhere at all.

I saw an even more egregious example of this a few years later. I had moved to Edmonton to finish my undergraduate degree. I took an apartment with my sister, who was studying to be a nurse. She was also an up-and-out-of-there person. (Not too many years later she would plant strawberries in Norway and run safaris through Africa and smuggle trucks across the Tuareg-

menaced Sahara Desert, and babysit orphan gorillas in the Congo.) We had a nice place in a new high-rise, overlooking the broad valley of the North Saskatchewan River. We had a view of the city skyline in the background. I bought a beautiful new Yamaha upright piano, in a fit of enthusiasm. The place looked good.

I heard through the grapevine that Ed—Chris's younger cousin—had moved to the city. I thought that was a good thing. One day he called. I invited him over. I wanted to see how he was faring. I hoped he was achieving some of the potential I once saw in him. That is not what happened. Ed showed up, older, balder and stooped. He was a lot more not-doing-so-well young adult and a lot less youthful possibility. His eyes were the telltale red slits of the practised stoner. Ed had had taken some job—lawn-mowing and casual landscaping—which would have been fine for a part-time university student or for someone who could not do better but which was wretchedly low-end as a career for an intelligent person.

He was accompanied by a friend.

It was his friend I really remember. He was spaced. He was baked. He was stoned out of his gourd. His head and our nice, civilized apartment did not easily occupy the same universe. My sister was there. She knew Ed. She'd seen this sort of thing before. But I still wasn't happy that Ed had brought this character into our place. Ed sat down. His friend sat down, too, although it wasn't clear he noticed. It was tragicomedy. Stoned as he was, Ed still had the sense to be embarrassed. We sipped our beer. Ed's friend looked upwards. "My particles are scattered all over the ceiling," he managed. Truer words were never spoken.

I took Ed aside and told him politely that he had to leave. I said that he shouldn't have brought his useless bastard of a companion. He nodded. He understood. That made it even worse. His older cousin Chris wrote me a letter much later about such things. I included it in my first book, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, published in 1999: "I had friends," he said.[62] "Before. Anyone with enough self-contempt that they could forgive me mine."

What was it that made Chris and Carl and Ed unable (or, worse, perhaps, unwilling) to move or to change their friendships and improve the circumstances of their lives? Was it inevitable—a consequence of their own

limitations, nascent illnesses and traumas of the past? After all, people vary significantly, in ways that seem both structural and deterministic. People differ in intelligence, which is in large part the ability to learn and transform. People have very different personalities, as well. Some are active, and some passive. Others are anxious or calm. For every individual driven to achieve, there is another who is indolent. The degree to which these differences are immutably part and parcel of someone is greater than an optimist might presume or desire. And then there is illness, mental and physical, diagnosed or invisible, further limiting or shaping our lives.

Chris had a psychotic break in his thirties, after flirting with insanity for many years. Not long afterward, he committed suicide. Did his heavy marijuana use play a magnifying role, or was it understandable self-medication? Use of physician-prescribed drugs for pain has, after all, decreased in marijuana-legal states such as Colorado.[63] Maybe the pot made things better for Chris, not worse. Maybe it eased his suffering, instead of exacerbating his instability. Was it the nihilistic philosophy he nurtured that paved the way to his eventual breakdown? Was that nihilism, in turn, a consequence of genuine ill health, or just an intellectual rationalization of his unwillingness to dive responsibly into life? Why did he—like his cousin, like my other friends—continually choose people who, and places that, were not good for him?

Sometimes, when people have a low opinion of their own worth—or, perhaps, when they refuse responsibility for their lives—they choose a new acquaintance, of precisely the type who proved troublesome in the past. Such people don’t believe that they deserve any better—so they don’t go looking for it. Or, perhaps, they don’t want the trouble of better. Freud called this a “repetition compulsion.” He thought of it as an unconscious drive to repeat the horrors of the past—sometimes, perhaps, to formulate those horrors more precisely, sometimes to attempt more active mastery and sometimes, perhaps, because no alternatives beckon. People create their worlds with the tools they have directly at hand. Faulty tools produce faulty results. Repeated use of the same faulty tools produces the same faulty results. It is in this manner that those who fail to learn from the past doom themselves to repeat it. It’s partly fate. It’s partly inability. It’s partly … unwillingness to learn? Refusal to learn? *Motivated* refusal to learn?

Rescuing the Damned

People choose friends who aren't good for them for other reasons, too. Sometimes it's because they want to rescue someone. This is more typical of young people, although the impetus still exists among older folks who are too agreeable or have remained naive or who are willfully blind. Someone might object, "It is only right to see the best in people. The highest virtue is the desire to help." But not everyone who is failing is a victim, and not everyone at the bottom wishes to rise, although many do, and many manage it. Nonetheless, people will often accept or even amplify their own suffering, as well as that of others, if they can brandish it as evidence of the world's injustice. There is no shortage of oppressors among the downtrodden, even if, given their lowly positions, many of them are only tyrannical wannabes. It's the easiest path to choose, moment to moment, although it's nothing but hell in the long run.

Imagine someone not doing well. He needs help. He might even want it. But it is not easy to distinguish between someone truly wanting and needing help and someone who is merely exploiting a willing helper. The distinction is difficult even for the person who is wanting and needing and possibly exploiting. The person who tries and fails, and is forgiven, and then tries again and fails, and is forgiven, is also too often the person who wants everyone to believe in the authenticity of all that trying.

When it's not just naïveté, the attempt to rescue someone is often fuelled by vanity and narcissism. Something like this is detailed in the incomparable Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky's bitter classic, *Notes from Underground*, which begins with these famous lines: "I am a sick man … I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased." It is the confession of a miserable, arrogant sojourner in the underworld of chaos and despair. He analyzes himself mercilessly, but only pays in this manner for a hundred sins, despite committing a thousand. Then, imagining himself redeemed, the underground man commits the worst transgression of the lot. He offers aid to a genuinely unfortunate person, Liza, a woman on the desperate nineteenth-century road to prostitution. He invites her for a visit, promising to set her life back on the proper course. While waiting for her to appear, his fantasies spin increasingly messianic:

> One day passed, however, another and another; she did not come and I began to grow calmer. I felt particularly bold and cheerful after nine o'clock, I even sometimes began dreaming, and rather sweetly: I, for instance, became the salvation of Liza, simply through her coming to me and my talking to her.… I develop her, educate her. Finally, I notice that she loves me, loves me passionately. I pretend not to understand (I don't know, however, why I pretend, just for effect, perhaps). At last all confusion, transfigured, trembling and sobbing, she flings herself at my feet and says that I am her savior, and that she loves me better than anything in the world.

Nothing but the narcissism of the underground man is nourished by such fantasies. Liza herself is demolished by them. The salvation he offers to her demands far more in the way of commitment and maturity than the underground man is willing or able to offer. He simply does not have the character to see it through—something he quickly realizes, and equally quickly rationalizes. Liza eventually arrives at his shabby apartment, hoping desperately for a way out, staking everything she has on the visit. She tells the underground man that she wants to leave her current life. His response?

> "Why have you come to me, tell me that, please?" I began, gasping for breath and regardless of logical connection in my words. I longed to have it all out at once, at one burst; I did not even trouble how to begin. "Why have you come? Answer, answer," I cried, hardly knowing what I was doing. "I'll tell you, my good girl, why you have come. You've come because I talked sentimental stuff to you then. So now you are soft as butter and longing for fine sentiments again. So you may as well know that I was laughing at you then. And I am laughing at you now. Why are you shuddering? Yes, I was laughing at you! I had been insulted just before, at dinner, by the fellows who came that evening before me. I came to you, meaning to thrash one of them, an officer; but I didn't succeed, I didn't find him; I had to avenge the insult on someone to get back my own again; you turned up, I vented my spleen on you and laughed at you. I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate; I had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to show my power.… That's what it was, and you imagined I had come there on purpose to save you. Yes? You imagined that? You imagined that?"
>
> I knew that she would perhaps be muddled and not take it all in exactly, but I knew, too, that she would grasp the gist of it, very well indeed. And so, indeed, she did. She turned white as a handkerchief, tried to say something, and her lips worked painfully; but she sank on a chair as though she had been felled by an axe. And all the time afterwards she listened to me with her lips parted and her eyes wide open, shuddering with awful terror. The cynicism, the cynicism of my words overwhelmed her.…

The inflated self-importance, carelessness and sheer malevolence of the underground man dashes Liza's last hopes. He understands this well. Worse: something in him was aiming at this all along. And he knows that too. But a villain who despairs of his villainy has not become a hero. A hero is something positive, not just the absence of evil.

But Christ himself, you might object, befriended tax-collectors and prostitutes. How dare I cast aspersions on the motives of those who are trying to help? But Christ was the archetypal perfect man. And you’re you. How do you know that your attempts to pull someone up won’t instead bring them—or you—further down? Imagine the case of someone supervising an exceptional team of workers, all of them striving towards a collectively held goal; imagine them hard-working, brilliant, creative and unified. But the person supervising is also responsible for someone troubled, who is performing poorly, elsewhere. In a fit of inspiration, the well-meaning manager moves that problematic person into the midst of his stellar team, hoping to improve him by example. What happens?—and the psychological literature is clear on this point.[64] Does the errant interloper immediately straighten up and fly right? No. Instead, the entire team degenerates. The newcomer remains cynical, arrogant and neurotic. He complains. He shirks. He misses important meetings. His low-quality work causes delays, and must be redone by others. He still gets paid, however, just like his teammates. The hard workers who surround him start to feel betrayed. “Why am I breaking myself into pieces striving to finish this project,” each thinks, “when my new team member never breaks a sweat?” The same thing happens when well-meaning counsellors place a delinquent teen among comparatively civilized peers. The delinquency spreads, not the stability.[65] Down is a lot easier than up.

Maybe you are saving someone because you’re a strong, generous, well-put-together person who wants to do the right thing. But it’s also possible—and, perhaps, more likely—that you just want to draw attention to your inexhaustible reserves of compassion and good-will. Or maybe you’re saving someone because you want to convince yourself that the strength of your character is more than just a side effect of your luck and birthplace. Or maybe it’s because it’s easier to look virtuous when standing alongside someone utterly irresponsible.

Assume first that you are doing the easiest thing, and not the most difficult.

Your raging alcoholism makes my binge drinking appear trivial. My long serious talks with you about your badly failing marriage convince both of us that you are doing everything possible and that I am helping you to my utmost. It looks like effort. It looks like progress. But real improvement

would require far more from both of you. Are you so sure the person crying out to be saved has not decided a thousand times to accept his lot of pointless and worsening suffering, simply because it is easier than shouldering any true responsibility? Are you enabling a delusion? Is it possible that your contempt would be more salutary than your pity?

Or maybe you have no plan, genuine or otherwise, to rescue anybody. You're associating with people who are bad for you not because it's better for anyone, but because it's easier. You know it. Your friends know it. You're all bound by an implicit contract—one aimed at nihilism, and failure, and suffering of the stupidest sort. You've all decided to sacrifice the future to the present. You don't talk about it. You don't all get together and say, "Let's take the easier path. Let's indulge in whatever the moment might bring. And let's agree, further, not to call each other on it. That way, we can more easily forget what we are doing." You don't mention any of that. But you all know what's really going on.

Before you help someone, you should find out why that person is in trouble. You shouldn't merely assume that he or she is a noble victim of unjust circumstances and exploitation. It's the most unlikely explanation, not the most probable. In my experience—clinical and otherwise—it's just never been that simple. Besides, if you buy the story that everything terrible just happened on its own, with no personal responsibility on the part of the victim, you deny that person all agency in the past (and, by implication, in the present and future, as well). In this manner, you strip him or her of all power.

It is far more likely that a given individual has just decided to reject the path upward, because of its difficulty. Perhaps that should even be your default assumption, when faced with such a situation. That's too harsh, you think. You might be right. Maybe that's a step too far. But consider this: failure is easy to understand. No explanation for its existence is required. In the same manner, fear, hatred, addiction, promiscuity, betrayal and deception require no explanation. It's not the existence of vice, or the indulgence in it, that requires explanation. Vice is easy. Failure is easy, too. It's easier not to shoulder a burden. It's easier not to think, and not to do, and not to care. It's easier to put off until tomorrow what needs to be done today, and drown the upcoming months and years in today's cheap pleasures. As the infamous father of the Simpson clan puts it, immediately prior to downing a jar of

mayonnaise and vodka, “That’s a problem for Future Homer. Man, I don’t envy that guy!”[66]

How do I know that your suffering is not the demand of martyrdom for my resources, so that you can oh-so-momentarily stave off the inevitable? Maybe you have even moved beyond caring about the impending collapse, but don’t yet want to admit it. Maybe my help won’t rectify anything—can’t rectify anything—but it does keep that too-terrible, too-personal realization temporarily at bay. Maybe your misery is a demand placed on me so that I fail too, so that the gap you so painfully feel between us can be reduced, while you degenerate and sink. How do I know that you would refuse to play such a game? How do I know that I am not myself merely pretending to be responsible, while pointlessly “helping” you, so that *I* don’t have to do something truly difficult—and genuinely possible?

Maybe your misery is the weapon you brandish in your hatred for those who rose upward while you waited and sank. Maybe your misery is your attempt to prove the world’s injustice, instead of the evidence of your own sin, your own missing of the mark, your conscious refusal to strive and to live. Maybe your willingness to suffer in failure is inexhaustible, given what you use that suffering to prove. Maybe it’s your revenge on Being. How exactly should I befriend you when you’re in such a place? How exactly could I?

Success: that’s the mystery. Virtue: that’s what’s inexplicable. To fail, you merely have to cultivate a few bad habits. You just have to bide your time. And once someone has spent enough time cultivating bad habits and biding their time, they are much diminished. Much of what they could have been has dissipated, and much of the less that they have become is now real. Things fall apart, of their own accord, but the sins of men speed their degeneration. And then comes the flood.

I am not saying that there is no hope of redemption. But it is much harder to extract someone from a chasm than to lift him from a ditch. And some chasms are very deep. And there’s not much left of the body at the bottom.

Maybe I should at least wait, to help you, until it’s clear that you want to be helped. Carl Rogers, the famous humanistic psychologist, believed it was impossible to start a therapeutic relationship if the person seeking help did not want to improve.[67] Rogers believed it was impossible to convince

someone to change for the better. The desire to improve was, instead, the precondition for progress. I've had court-mandated psychotherapy clients. They did not want my help. They were forced to seek it. It did not work. It was a travesty.

If I stay in an unhealthy relationship with you, perhaps it's because I'm too weak-willed and indecisive to leave, but I don't want to know it. Thus, I continue helping you, and console myself with my pointless martyrdom. Maybe I can then conclude, about myself, "Someone that self-sacrificing, that willing to help someone—that has to be a good person." Not so. It might be just a person trying to look good pretending to solve what appears to be a difficult problem instead of actually being good and addressing something real.

Maybe instead of continuing our friendship I should just go off somewhere, get my act together, and lead by example.

And none of this is a justification for abandoning those in real need to pursue your narrow, blind ambition, in case it has to be said.

A Reciprocal Arrangement

Here's something to consider: If you have a friend whose friendship you wouldn't recommend to your sister, or your father, or your son, why would you have such a friend for yourself? You might say: out of loyalty. Well, loyalty is not identical to stupidity. Loyalty must be negotiated, fairly and honestly. Friendship is a reciprocal arrangement. You are not morally obliged to support someone who is making the world a worse place. Quite the opposite. You should choose people who want things to be better, not worse. It's a good thing, not a selfish thing, to choose people who are good for you. It's appropriate and praiseworthy to associate with people whose lives would be improved if they saw your life improve.

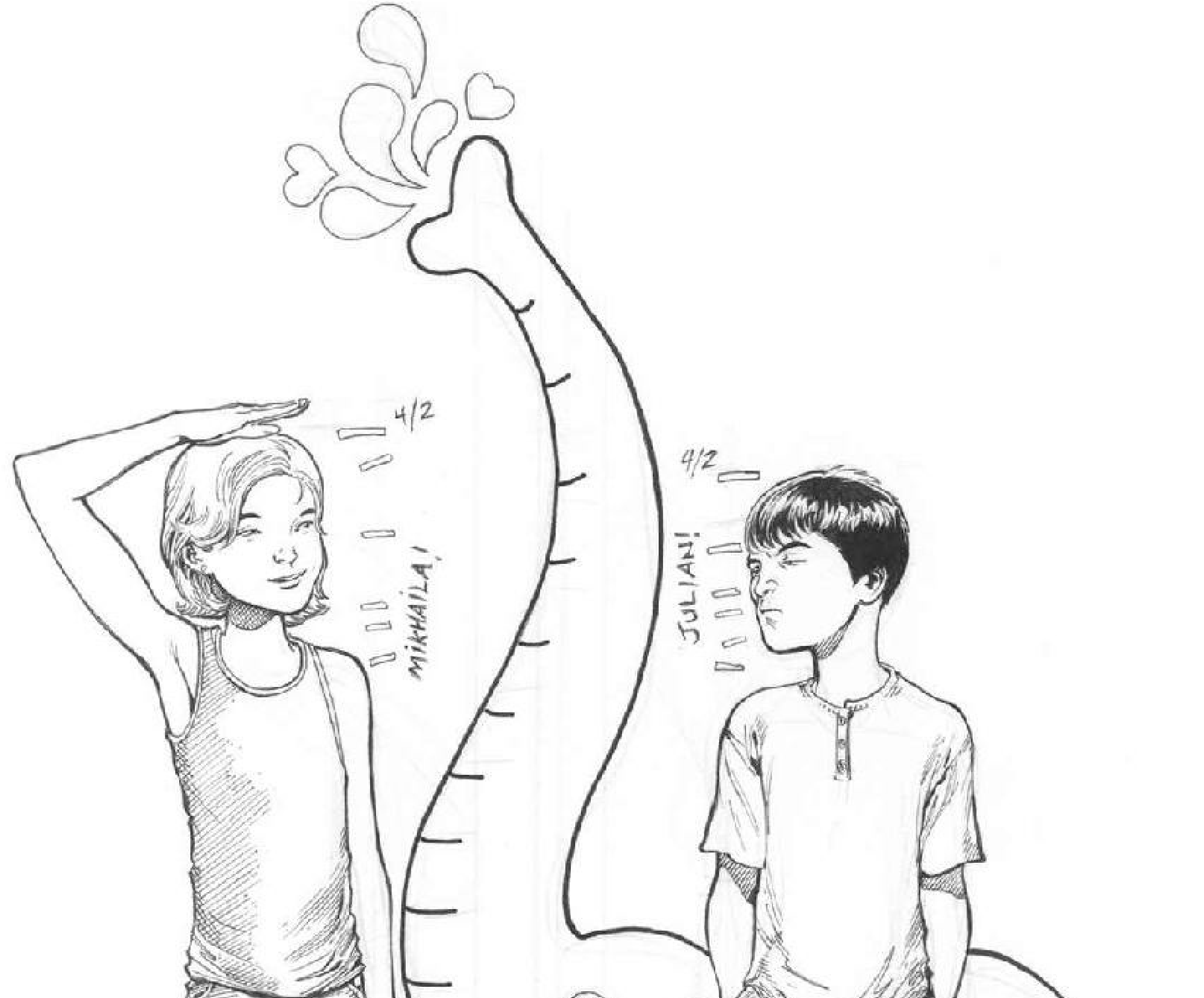
If you surround yourself with people who support your upward aim, they will not tolerate your cynicism and destructiveness. They will instead encourage you when you do good for yourself and others and punish you carefully when you do not. This will help bolster your resolve to do what you should do, in the most appropriate and careful manner. People who are not aiming up will do the opposite. They will offer a former smoker a cigarette and a former alcoholic a beer. They will become jealous when you succeed,

or do something pristine. They will withdraw their presence or support, or actively punish you for it. They will over-ride your accomplishment with a past action, real or imaginary, of their own. Maybe they are trying to test you, to see if your resolve is real, to see if you are genuine. But mostly they are dragging you down because your new improvements cast their faults in an even dimmer light.

It is for this reason that every good example is a fateful challenge, and every hero, a judge. Michelangelo’s great perfect marble David cries out to its observer: “You could be more than you are.” When you dare aspire upward, you reveal the inadequacy of the present and the promise of the future. Then you disturb others, in the depths of their souls, where they understand that their cynicism and immobility are unjustifiable. You play Abel to their Cain. You remind them that they ceased caring not because of life’s horrors, which are undeniable, but because they do not want to lift the world up on to their shoulders, where it belongs.

Don’t think that it is easier to surround yourself with good healthy people than with bad unhealthy people. It’s not. A good, healthy person is an ideal. It requires strength and daring to stand up near such a person. Have some humility. Have some courage. Use your judgment, and protect yourself from too-uncritical compassion and pity.

Make friends with people who want the best for you.


4/2
MIKHAILA!
4/2
JULIAN!

RULE 4

COMPARE YOURSELF TO WHO YOU WERE YESTERDAY, NOT TO WHO SOMEONE ELSE IS TODAY

THE INTERNAL CRITIC

It was easier for people to be good at something when more of us lived in small, rural communities. Someone could be homecoming queen. Someone else could be spelling-bee champ, math whiz or basketball star. There were only one or two mechanics and a couple of teachers. In each of their domains, these local heroes had the opportunity to enjoy the serotonin-fuelled confidence of the victor. It may be for that reason that people who were born in small towns are statistically overrepresented among the eminent.[68] If you're one in a million now, but originated in modern New York, there's twenty of you—and most of us now live in cities. What's more, we have become digitally connected to the entire seven billion. Our hierarchies of accomplishment are now dizzyingly vertical.

No matter how good you are at something, or how you rank your accomplishments, there is someone out there who makes you look incompetent. You're a decent guitar player, but you're not Jimmy Page or Jack White. You're almost certainly not even going to rock your local pub. You're a good cook, but there are many great chefs. Your mother's recipe for fish heads and rice, no matter how celebrated in her village of origin, doesn't cut it in these days of grapefruit foam and Scotch/tobacco ice-cream. Some Mafia don has a tackier yacht. Some obsessive CEO has a more complicated self-winding watch, kept in his more valuable mechanical hardwood-and-steel automatic self-winding watch case. Even the most stunning Hollywood actress eventually transforms into the Evil Queen, on eternal, paranoid watch for the new Snow White. And you? Your career is boring and pointless, your housekeeping skills are second-rate, your taste is appalling, you're fatter than

your friends, and everyone dreads your parties. Who cares if you are prime minister of Canada when someone else is the president of the United States?

Inside us dwells a critical internal voice and spirit that knows all this. It's predisposed to make its noisy case. It condemns our mediocre efforts. It can be very difficult to quell. Worse, critics of its sort are necessary. There is no shortage of tasteless artists, tuneless musicians, poisonous cooks, bureaucratically-personality-disordered middle managers, hack novelists and tedious, ideology-ridden professors. Things and people differ importantly in their qualities. Awful music torments listeners everywhere. Poorly designed buildings crumble in earthquakes. Substandard automobiles kill their drivers when they crash. Failure is the price we pay for standards and, because mediocrity has consequences both real and harsh, standards are necessary.

We are not equal in ability or outcome, and never will be. A very small number of people produce very much of everything. The winners don't take all, but they take most, and the bottom is not a good place to be. People are unhappy at the bottom. They get sick there, and remain unknown and unloved. They waste their lives there. They die there. In consequence, the self-denigrating voice in the minds of people weaves a devastating tale. Life is a zero-sum game. Worthlessness is the default condition. What but willful blindness could possibly shelter people from such withering criticism? It is for such reasons that a whole generation of social psychologists recommended "positive illusions" as the only reliable route to mental health.[69] Their credo? Let a lie be your umbrella. A more dismal, wretched, pessimistic philosophy can hardly be imagined: things are so terrible that only delusion can save you.

Here is an alternative approach (and one that requires no illusions). If the cards are always stacked against you, perhaps the game you are playing is somehow rigged (perhaps by you, unbeknownst to yourself). If the internal voice makes you doubt the value of your endeavours—or your life, or life itself—perhaps you should stop listening. If the critical voice within says the same denigrating things about everyone, no matter how successful, how reliable can it be? Maybe its comments are chatter, not wisdom. *There will always be people better than you*—that's a cliché of nihilism, like the phrase, *In a million years, who's going to know the difference?* The proper response to that statement is not, *Well, then, everything is meaningless.* It's, *Any idiot*

can choose a frame of time within which nothing matters. Talking yourself into irrelevance is not a profound critique of Being. It's a cheap trick of the rational mind.

Many Good Games

Standards of better or worse are not illusory or unnecessary. If you hadn't decided that what you are doing right now was better than the alternatives, you wouldn't be doing it. The idea of a value-free choice is a contradiction in terms. Value judgments are a precondition for action. Furthermore, every activity, once chosen, comes with its own internal standards of accomplishment. If something can be done at all, it can be done better or worse. To do anything at all is therefore to play a game with a defined and valued end, which can always be reached more or less efficiently and elegantly. Every game comes with its chance of success or failure. Differentials in quality are omnipresent. Furthermore, if there was no better and worse, nothing would be worth doing. There would be no value and, therefore, no meaning. Why make an effort if it doesn't improve anything? Meaning itself requires the difference between better and worse. How, then, can the voice of critical self-consciousness be stilled? Where are the flaws in the apparently impeccable logic of its message?

We might start by considering the all-too-black-and-white words themselves: "success" or "failure." You are either a success, a comprehensive, singular, over-all good thing, or its opposite, a failure, a comprehensive, singular, irredeemably bad thing. The words imply no alternative and no middle ground. However, in a world as complex as ours, such generalizations (really, such failure to differentiate) are a sign of naive, unsophisticated or even malevolent analysis. There are vital degrees and gradations of value obliterated by this binary system, and the consequences are not good.

To begin with, there is not just one game at which to succeed or fail. There are many games and, more specifically, many good games—games that match your talents, involve you productively with other people, and sustain and even improve themselves across time. Lawyer is a good game. So is plumber, physician, carpenter, or schoolteacher. The world allows for many ways of Being. If you don't succeed at one, you can try another. You can

pick something better matched to your unique mix of strengths, weaknesses and situation. Furthermore, if changing games does not work, you can invent a new one. I recently watched a talent show featuring a mime who taped his mouth shut and did something ridiculous with oven mitts. That was unexpected. That was original. It seemed to be working for him.

It’s also unlikely that you’re playing only one game. You have a career and friends and family members and personal projects and artistic endeavors and athletic pursuits. You might consider judging your success across all the games you play. Imagine that you are very good at some, middling at others, and terrible at the remainder. Perhaps that’s how it should be. You might object: I should be winning at everything! But winning at everything might only mean that you’re not doing anything new or difficult. You might be winning but you’re not growing, and growing might be the most important form of winning. Should victory in the present always take precedence over trajectory across time?

Finally, you might come to realize that the specifics of the many games you are playing are so unique to you, so individual, that comparison to others is simply inappropriate. Perhaps you are overvaluing what you don’t have and undervaluing what you do. There’s some real utility in gratitude. It’s also good protection against the dangers of victimhood and resentment. Your colleague outperforms you at work. His wife, however, is having an affair, while your marriage is stable and happy. Who has it better? The celebrity you admire is a chronic drunk driver and bigot. Is his life truly preferable to yours?

When the internal critic puts you down using such comparisons, here’s how it operates: First, it selects a single, arbitrary domain of comparison (fame, maybe, or power). Then it acts as if that domain is the only one that is relevant. Then it contrasts you unfavourably with someone truly stellar, within that domain. It can take that final step even further, using the unbridgeable gap between you and its target of comparison as evidence for the fundamental injustice of life. That way your motivation to do anything at all can be most effectively undermined. Those who accept such an approach to self-evaluation certainly can’t be accused of making things too easy for themselves. But it’s just as big a problem to make things too difficult.

When we are very young we are neither individual nor informed. We have not had the time nor gained the wisdom to develop our own standards. In

consequence, we must compare ourselves to others, because standards are necessary. Without them, there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. As we mature we become, by contrast, increasingly individual and unique. The conditions of our lives become more and more personal and less and less comparable with those of others. Symbolically speaking, this means we must leave the house ruled by our father, and confront the chaos of our individual Being. We must take note of our disarray, without completely abandoning that father in the process. We must then rediscover the values of our culture—veiled from us by our ignorance, hidden in the dusty treasure-trove of the past—rescue them, and integrate them into our own lives. This is what gives existence its full and necessary meaning.

Who are you? You think you know, but maybe you don't. You are, for example, neither your own master, nor your own slave. You cannot easily tell yourself what to do and compel your own obedience (any more than you can easily tell your husband, wife, son or daughter what to do, and compel theirs). You are interested in some things and not in others. You can shape that interest, but there are limits. Some activities will always engage you, and others simply will not.

You have a nature. You can play the tyrant to it, but you will certainly rebel. How hard can you force yourself to work and sustain your desire to work? How much can you sacrifice to your partner before generosity turns to resentment? What is it that you actually love? What is it that you genuinely want? Before you can articulate your own standards of value, you must see yourself as a stranger—and then you must get to know yourself. What do you find valuable or pleasurable? How much leisure, enjoyment, and reward do you require, so that you feel like more than a beast of burden? How must you treat yourself, so you won't kick over the traces and smash up your corral? You could force yourself through your daily grind and kick your dog in frustration when you come home. You could watch the precious days tick by. Or you could learn how to entice yourself into sustainable, productive activity. Do you ask yourself what you want? Do you negotiate fairly with yourself? Or are you a tyrant, with yourself as slave?

When do you dislike your parents, your spouse, or your children, and why? What might be done about that? What do you need and want from your friends and your business partners? This is not a mere matter of what you *should* want. I'm not talking about what other people require from you, or

your duties to them. I'm talking about determining the nature of your moral obligation, to yourself. *Should* might enter into it, because you are nested within a network of social obligations. *Should* is your responsibility, and you should live up to it. But this does not mean you must take the role of lap-dog, obedient and harmless. That's how a dictator wants his slaves.

Dare, instead, to be dangerous. Dare to be truthful. Dare to articulate yourself, and express (or at least become aware of) what would really justify your life. If you allowed your dark and unspoken desires for your partner, for example, to manifest themselves—if you were even willing to consider them—you might discover that they were not so dark, given the light of day. You might discover, instead, that you were just afraid and, so, pretending to be moral. You might find that getting what you actually desire would stop you from being tempted and straying. Are you so sure that your partner would be unhappy if more of you rose to the surface? The femme fatale and the anti-hero are sexually attractive for a reason.…

How do you need to be spoken to? What do you need to take from people? What are you putting up with, or pretending to like, from duty or obligation? Consult your resentment. It's a revelatory emotion, for all its pathology. It's part of an evil triad: arrogance, deceit, and resentment. Nothing causes more harm than this underworld Trinity. But resentment always means one of two things. Either the resentful person is immature, in which case he or she should shut up, quit whining, and get on with it, or there is tyranny afoot—in which case the person subjugated has a moral obligation to speak up. Why? Because the consequence of remaining silent is worse. Of course, it's easier in the moment to stay silent and avoid conflict. But in the long term, that's deadly. When you have something to say, silence is a lie—and tyranny feeds on lies. When should you push back against oppression, despite the danger? When you start nursing secret fantasies of revenge; when your life is being poisoned and your imagination fills with the wish to devour and destroy.

I had a client decades ago who suffered from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. He had to line up his pyjamas just right before he could go to sleep at night. Then he had to fluff his pillow. Then he had to adjust the bedsheets. Over and over and over and over. I said, "Maybe that part of you, that insanely persistent part, wants something, inarticulate though it may be. Let it have its say. What could it be?" He said, "Control." I said, "Close your eyes and let it tell you what it wants. Don't let fear stop you. You don't have to act

it out, just because you're thinking it." He said, "It wants me to take my stepfather by the collar, put him up against the door, and shake him like a rat." Maybe it was time to shake someone like a rat, although I suggested something a bit less primal. But God only knows what battles must be fought, forthrightly, voluntarily, on the road to peace. What do you do to avoid conflict, necessary though it may be? What are you inclined to lie about, assuming that the truth might be intolerable? What do you fake?

The infant is dependent on his parents for almost everything he needs. The child—the successful child—can leave his parents, at least temporarily, and make friends. He gives up a little of himself to do that, but gains much in return. The successful adolescent must take that process to its logical conclusion. He has to leave his parents and become like everyone else. He has to integrate with the group so he can transcend his childhood dependency. Once integrated, the successful adult then must learn how to be just the right amount different from everyone else.

Be cautious when you're comparing yourself to others. You're a singular being, once you're an adult. You have your own particular, specific problems—financial, intimate, psychological, and otherwise. Those are embedded in the unique broader context of your existence. Your career or job works for you in a personal manner, or it does not, and it does so in a unique interplay with the other specifics of your life. You must decide how much of your time to spend on this, and how much on that. You must decide what to let go, and what to pursue.

The Point of Our Eyes (or, Take Stock)

Our eyes are always pointing at things we are interested in approaching, or investigating, or looking for, or having. We must see, but to see, we must aim, so we are always aiming. Our minds are built on the hunting-and-gathering platforms of our bodies. To hunt is to specify a target, track it, and throw at it. To gather is to specify and to grasp. We fling stones, and spears, and boomerangs. We toss balls through hoops, and hit pucks into nets, and curl carved granite rocks down the ice onto horizontal bull's-eyes. We launch projectiles at targets with bows, guns, rifles and rockets. We hurl insults, launch plans, and pitch ideas. We succeed when we score a goal or hit a target. We fail, or sin, when we do not (as the word *sin* means to miss the

mark[70]). We cannot navigate, without something to aim at and, while we are in this world, we must always navigate.[71]

We are always and simultaneously *at* point “a” (which is less desirable than it could be), *moving towards* point “b” (which we deem better, in accordance with our explicit and implicit values). We always encounter the world in a state of insufficiency and seek its correction. We can imagine new ways that things could be set right, and improved, even if we have everything we thought we needed. Even when satisfied, temporarily, we remain curious. We live within a framework that defines the present as eternally lacking and the future as eternally better. If we did not see things this way, we would not act at all. We wouldn’t even be able to see, because to see we must focus, and to focus we must pick one thing above all else on which to focus.

But we can see. We can even see things that aren’t there. We can envision new ways that things could be better. We can construct new, hypothetical worlds, where problems we weren’t even aware of can now show themselves and be addressed. The advantages of this are obvious: we can change the world so that the intolerable state of the present can be rectified in the future. The disadvantage to all this foresight and creativity is chronic unease and discomfort. Because we always contrast what is with what could be, we have to aim at what could be. But we can aim too high. Or too low. Or too chaotically. So we fail and live in disappointment, even when we appear to others to be living well. How can we benefit from our imaginativeness, our ability to improve the future, without continually denigrating our current, insufficiently successful and worthless lives?

The first step, perhaps, is to take stock. Who are you? When you buy a house and prepare to live in it, you hire an inspector to list all its faults—as it is, in reality, now, not as you wish it could be. You’ll even pay him for the bad news. You need to know. You need to discover the home’s hidden flaws. You need to know whether they are cosmetic imperfections or structural inadequacies. You need to know because you can’t fix something if you don’t know it’s broken—and you’re broken. You need an inspector. The internal critic—it could play that role, if you could get it on track; if you and it could cooperate. It could help you take stock. But you must walk through your psychological house with it and listen judiciously to what it says. Maybe you’re a handy-man’s dream, a real fixer-upper. How can you start your

renovations without being demoralized, even crushed, by your internal critic's lengthy and painful report of your inadequacies?

Here's a hint. The future is like the past. But there's a crucial difference. The past is fixed, but the future—it could be better. It could be better, some precise amount—the amount that can be achieved, perhaps, in a day, with some minimal engagement. The present is eternally flawed. But where you start might not be as important as the direction you are heading. *Perhaps happiness is always to be found in the journey uphill, and not in the fleeting sense of satisfaction awaiting at the next peak.* Much of happiness is hope, no matter how deep the underworld in which that hope was conceived.

Called upon properly, the internal critic will suggest something to set in order, which you *could* set in order, which you *would* set in order—voluntarily, without resentment, even with pleasure. Ask yourself: is there one thing that exists in disarray in your life or your situation that you could, and would, set straight? Could you, and would you, fix that one thing that announces itself humbly in need of repair? Could you do it now? Imagine that you are someone with whom you must negotiate. Imagine further that you are lazy, touchy, resentful and hard to get along with. With that attitude, it's not going to be easy to get you moving. You might have to use a little charm and playfulness. "Excuse me," you might say to yourself, without irony or sarcasm. "I'm trying to reduce some of the unnecessary suffering around here. I could use some help." Keep the derision at bay. "I'm wondering if there is anything that you would be willing to do? I'd be very grateful for your service." Ask honestly and with humility. That's no simple matter.

You might have to negotiate further, depending on your state of mind. Maybe you don't trust yourself. You think that you'll ask yourself for one thing and, having delivered, immediately demand more. And you'll be punitive and hurtful about it. And you'll denigrate what was already offered. Who wants to work for a tyrant like that? Not you. That's why you don't do what you want yourself to do. You're a bad employee—but a worse boss. Maybe you need to say to yourself, "OK. I know we haven't gotten along very well in the past. I'm sorry about that. I'm trying to improve. I'll probably make some more mistakes along the way, but I'll try to listen if you object. I'll try to learn. I noticed, just now, today, that you weren't really jumping at the opportunity to help when I asked. Is there something I could

offer in return for your cooperation? Maybe if you did the dishes, we could go for coffee. You like espresso. How about an espresso—maybe a double shot? Or is there something else you want?" Then you could listen. Maybe you'll hear a voice inside (maybe it's even the voice of a long-lost child). Maybe it will reply, "Really? You really want to do something nice for me? You'll really do it? It's not a trick?"

This is where you must be careful.

That little voice—that's the voice of someone once burnt and twice shy. So, you could say, very carefully, "Really. I might not do it very well, and I might not be great company, but I will do something nice for you. I promise." A little careful kindness goes a long way, and judicious reward is a powerful motivator. Then you could take that small bit of yourself by the hand and do the damn dishes. And then you better not go clean the bathroom and forget about the coffee or the movie or the beer or it will be even harder to call those forgotten parts of yourself forth from the nooks and crannies of the underworld.

You might ask yourself, "What could I say to someone else—my friend, my brother, my boss, my assistant—that would set things a bit more right between us tomorrow? What bit of chaos might I eradicate at home, on my desk, in my kitchen, tonight, so that the stage could be set for a better play? What snakes might I banish from my closet—and my mind?" Five hundred small decisions, five hundred tiny actions, compose your day, today, and every day. Could you aim one or two of these at a better result? Better, in your own private opinion, by your own individual standards? Could you compare your specific personal tomorrow with your specific personal yesterday? Could you use your own judgment, and ask yourself what that better tomorrow might be?

Aim small. You don't want to shoulder too much to begin with, given your limited talents, tendency to deceive, burden of resentment, and ability to shirk responsibility. Thus, you set the following goal: by the end of the day, I want things in my life to be a tiny bit better than they were this morning. Then you ask yourself, "What could I do, that I would do, that would accomplish that, and what small thing would I like as a reward?" Then you do what you have decided to do, even if you do it badly. Then you give yourself that damn coffee, in triumph. Maybe you feel a bit stupid about it, but you do it anyway. And you do the same thing tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. And,

with each day, your baseline of comparison gets a little higher, and that's magic. That's compound interest. Do that for three years, and your life will be entirely different. Now you're aiming for something higher. Now you're wishing on a star. Now the beam is disappearing from your eye, and you're learning to see. And what you aim at determines what you see. That's worth repeating. *What you aim at determines what you see.*

What You Want and What You See

The dependency of sight on aim (and, therefore, on value—because you aim at what you value) was demonstrated unforgettably by the cognitive psychologist Daniel Simons more than fifteen years ago.[72] Simons was investigating something called "sustained inattentional blindness." He would sit his research subjects in front of a video monitor and show them, for example, a field of wheat. Then he would transform the photo slowly, secretly, while they watched. He would slowly fade in a road cutting through the wheat. He didn't insert some little easy-to-miss footpath, either. It was a major trail, occupying a good third of the image. Remarkably, the observers would frequently fail to take notice.

The demonstration that made Dr. Simons famous was of the same kind, but more dramatic—even unbelievable. First, he produced a video of two teams of three people.[73] One team was wearing white shirts, the other, black. (The two teams were not off in the distance, either, or in any way difficult to see. The six of them filled much of the video screen, and their facial features were close enough to see clearly.) Each team had its own ball, which they bounced or threw to their other team members, as they moved and feinted in the small space in front of the elevators where the game was filmed. Once Dan had his video, he showed it to his study participants. He asked each of them to count the number of times the white shirts threw the ball back and forth to one another. After a few minutes, his subjects were asked to report the number of passes. Most answered "15." That was the correct answer. Most felt pretty good about that. Ha! They passed the test! But then Dr. Simons asked, "Did you see the gorilla?"

Was this a joke? What gorilla?

So, he said, "Watch the video again. But this time, don't count." Sure enough, a minute or so in, a man dressed in a gorilla suit waltzes right into

the middle of the game for a few long seconds, stops, and then beats his chest in the manner of stereotyped gorillas everywhere. Right in the middle of the screen. Large as life. Painfully and irrefutably evident. But one out of every two of his research subjects missed it, the first time they saw the video. It gets worse. Dr. Simons did another study. This time, he showed his subjects a video of someone being served at a counter. The server dips behind the counter to retrieve something, and pops back up. So what? Most of his participants don't detect anything amiss. But it was a different person who stood up in the original server's place! "No way," you think. "I'd notice." But it's "yes way." There's a high probability you wouldn't detect the change, even if the gender or race of the person is switched at the same time. You're blind too.

This is partly because vision is expensive—psychophysiologically expensive; neurologically expensive. Very little of your retina is high-resolution fovea—the very central, high-resolution part of the eye, used to do such things as identify faces. Each of the scarce foveal cells needs 10,000 cells in the visual cortex merely to manage the first part of the multi-stage processing of seeing.[74] Then each of those 10,000 requires 10,000 more just to get to stage two. If all your retina was fovea you would require the skull of a B-movie alien to house your brain. In consequence, we triage, when we see. Most of our vision is peripheral, and low resolution. We save the fovea for things of importance. We point our high-resolution capacities at the few specific things we are aiming at. And we let everything else—which is almost everything—fade, unnoticed, into the background.

If something you're not attending to pops its ugly head up in a manner that directly interferes with your narrowly focused current activity, you will see it. Otherwise, it's just not there. The ball on which Simons's research subjects were focused was never obscured by the gorilla or by any of the six players. Because of that—because the gorilla did not interfere with the ongoing, narrowly defined task—it was indistinguishable from everything else the participants didn't see, when they were looking at that ball. The big ape could be safely ignored. That's how you deal with the overwhelming complexity of the world: you ignore it, while you concentrate minutely on your private concerns. You see things that facilitate your movement forward, toward your desired goals. You detect obstacles, when they pop up in your path. You're

blind to everything else (and there's a lot of everything else—so you're very blind). And it has to be that way, because there is much more of the world than there is of you. You must shepherd your limited resources carefully. Seeing is very difficult, so you must choose what to see, and let the rest go.

There's a profound idea in the ancient Vedic texts (the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, and part of the bedrock of Indian culture): the world, as perceived, is *maya*—appearance or illusion. This means, in part, that people are blinded by their desires (as well as merely incapable of seeing things as they truly are). This is true, in a sense that transcends the metaphorical. Your eyes are tools. They are there to help you get what you want. The price you pay for that utility, that specific, focused direction, is blindness to everything else. This doesn't matter so much when things are going well, and we are getting what we want (although it can be a problem, even then, because getting what we currently want can make blind us to higher callings). But all that ignored world presents a truly terrible problem when we're in crisis, and nothing whatsoever is turning out the way we want it to. Then, there can be far too much to deal with. Happily, however, that problem contains within it the seeds of its own solution. Since you've ignored so much, there is plenty of possibility left where you have not yet looked.

Imagine that you're unhappy. You're not getting what you need. Perversely, this may be because of what you want. You are blind, because of what you desire. Perhaps what you really need is right in front of your eyes, but you cannot see it because of what you are currently aiming for. And that brings us to something else: the price that must be paid before you, or anyone, can get what they want (or, better yet, what they need). Think about it this way. You look at the world in your particular, idiosyncratic manner. You use a set of tools to screen most things out and let some things in. You have spent a lot of time building those tools. They've become habitual. They're not mere abstract thoughts. They're built right into you. They orient you in the world. They're your deepest and often implicit and unconscious values. They've become part of your biological structure. They're alive. And they don't want to disappear, or transform, or die. But sometimes their time has come, and new things need to be born. For this reason (although not only for this reason) it is necessary to let things go during the journey uphill. If things are not going well for you—well, that might be because, as the most cynical of aphorisms has it, life sucks, and then you die. Before your crisis

impels you to that hideous conclusion, however, you might consider the following: *life doesn't have the problem. You do.* At least that realization leaves you with some options. If your life is not going well, perhaps it is your current knowledge that is insufficient, not life itself. Perhaps your value structure needs some serious retooling. Perhaps what you want is blinding you to what else could be. Perhaps you are holding on to your desires, in the present, so tightly that you cannot see anything else—even what you truly need.

Imagine that you are thinking, enviously, "I should have my boss's job." If your boss sticks to his post, stubbornly and competently, thoughts like that will lead you into in a state of irritation, unhappiness and disgust. You might realize this. You think, "I am unhappy. However, I could be cured of this unhappiness if I could just fulfill my ambition." But then you might think further. "Wait," you think. "Maybe I'm not unhappy because I don't have my boss's job. Maybe I'm unhappy because I can't stop wanting that job." That doesn't mean you can just simply and magically tell yourself to stop wanting that job, and then listen and transform. You won't—can't, in fact—just change yourself that easily. You have to dig deeper. You must change what you are after more profoundly.

So, you might think, "I don't know what to do about this stupid suffering. I can't just abandon my ambitions. That would leave me nowhere to go. But my longing for a job that I can't have isn't working." You might decide to take a different tack. You might ask, instead, for the revelation of a different plan: one that would fulfill your desires and gratify your ambitions in a real sense, but that would remove from your life the bitterness and resentment with which you are currently affected. You might think, "I will make a different plan. I will try to want whatever it is *that would make my life better* —whatever that might be—and I will start working on it now. If that turns out to mean something other than chasing my boss's job, I will accept that and I will move forward."

Now you're on a whole different kind of trajectory. Before, what was right, desirable, and worthy of pursuit was something narrow and concrete. But you became stuck there, tightly jammed and unhappy. So you let go. You make the necessary sacrifice, and allow a whole new world of possibility, hidden from you because of your previous ambition, to reveal itself. And there's a lot there. What would your life look like, *if it were better*? What would Life

Itself look like? What does “better” even mean? You don’t know. And it doesn’t matter that you don’t know, exactly, right away, because you will start to slowly see what is “better,” once you have truly decided to want it. You will start to perceive what remained hidden from you by your presuppositions and preconceptions—by the previous mechanisms of your vision. You will begin to learn.

This will only work, however, if you genuinely want your life to improve. You can’t fool your implicit perceptual structures. Not even a bit. They aim where you point them. To retool, to take stock, to aim somewhere better, you have to think it through, bottom to top. You have to scour your psyche. You have to clean the damned thing up. And you must be cautious, because making your life better means adopting a lot of responsibility, and that takes more effort and care than living stupidly in pain and remaining arrogant, deceitful and resentful.

What if it was the case that the world revealed whatever goodness it contains in precise proportion to your desire for the best? What if the more your conception of the best has been elevated, expanded and rendered sophisticated the more possibility and benefit you could perceive? This doesn’t mean that you can have what you want merely by wishing it, or that everything is interpretation, or that there is no reality. The world is still there, with its structures and limits. As you move along with it, it cooperates or objects. But you can dance with it, if your aim is to dance—and maybe you can even lead, if you have enough skill and enough grace. This is not theology. It’s not mysticism. It’s empirical knowledge. There is nothing magical here—or nothing more than the already-present magic of consciousness. We only see what we aim at. The rest of the world (and that’s most of it) is hidden. If we start aiming at something different—something like “I want my life to be better”—our minds will start presenting us with new information, derived from the previously hidden world, to aid us in that pursuit. Then we can put that information to use and move, and act, and observe, and improve. And, after doing so, after improving, we might pursue something different, or higher—something like, “I want whatever might be better than just my life being better.” And then we enter a more elevated and more complete reality.

In that place, what might we focus on? What might we see?

Think about it like this. Start from the observation that we indeed desire

things—even that we need them. That's human nature. We share the experience of hunger, loneliness, thirst, sexual desire, aggression, fear and pain. Such things are elements of Being—primordial, axiomatic elements of Being. But we must sort and organize these primordial desires, because the world is a complex and obstinately real place. We can't just get the one particular thing we especially just want now, along with everything else we usually want, because our desires can produce conflict with our other desires, as well as with other people, and with the world. Thus, we must become conscious of our desires, and articulate them, and prioritize them, and arrange them into hierarchies. That makes them sophisticated. That makes them work with each other, and with the desires of other people, and with the world. It is in that manner that our desires elevate themselves. It is in that manner that they organize themselves into values and become moral. Our values, our morality—they are indicators of our sophistication.

The philosophical study of morality—of right and wrong—is ethics. Such study can render us more sophisticated in our choices. Even older and deeper than ethics, however, is religion. Religion concerns itself not with (mere) right and wrong but with good and evil themselves—with the archetypes of right and wrong. Religion concerns itself with domain of value, ultimate value. That is not the scientific domain. It's not the territory of empirical description. The people who wrote and edited the Bible, for example, weren't scientists. They couldn't have been scientists, even if they had wanted to be. The viewpoints, methods and practices of science hadn't been formulated when the Bible was written.

Religion is instead *about proper behaviour*. It's about what Plato called "the Good." A genuine religious acolyte isn't trying to formulate accurate ideas about the objective nature of the world (although he may be trying to do that to). He's striving, instead, to be a "good person." It may be the case that to him "good" means nothing but "obedient"—even blindly obedient. Hence the classic liberal Western enlightenment objection to religious belief: obedience is not enough. But it's at least a start (and we have forgotten this): *You cannot aim yourself at anything if you are completely undisciplined and untutored*. You will not know what to target, and you won't fly straight, even if you somehow get your aim right. And then you will conclude, "There is nothing to aim for." And then you will be lost.

It is therefore necessary and desirable for religions to have a dogmatic

element. What good is a value system that does not provide a stable structure? What good is a value system that does not point the way to a higher order? And what good can you possibly be if you cannot or do not internalize that structure, or accept that order—not as a final destination, necessarily, but at least as a starting point? Without that, you're nothing but an adult two-year-old, without the charm or the potential. That is not to say (to say it again) that obedience is sufficient. But a person capable of obedience—let's say, instead, a properly disciplined person—is at least a well-forged tool. At least that (and that is not nothing). Of course, there must be vision, beyond discipline; beyond dogma. A tool still needs a purpose. It is for such reasons that Christ said, in the Gospel of Thomas, "The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, but men do not see it."[75]

Does that mean that what we see is dependent on our religious beliefs? Yes! And what we don't see, as well! You might object, "But I'm an atheist." No, you're *not* (and if you want to understand this, you could read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, perhaps the greatest novel ever written, in which the main character, Raskolnikov, decides to take his atheism with true seriousness, commits what he has rationalized as a benevolent murder, and pays the price). You're simply not an atheist in your actions, and it is your actions that most accurately reflect your deepest beliefs—those that are implicit, embedded in your being, underneath your conscious apprehensions and articulable attitudes and surface-level self-knowledge. You can only find out what you actually believe (rather than what you think you believe) by watching how you act. You simply don't know what you believe, before that. You are too complex to understand yourself.

It takes careful observation, and education, and reflection, and communication with others, just to scratch the surface of your beliefs. Everything you value is a product of unimaginably lengthy developmental processes, personal, cultural and biological. You don't understand how what you want—and, therefore, what you see—is conditioned by the immense, abysmal, profound past. You simply don't understand how every neural circuit through which you peer at the world has been shaped (and painfully) by the ethical aims of millions of years of human ancestors and all of the life that was lived for the billions of years before that.

You don't understand anything.

You didn’t even know that you were blind.

Some of our knowledge of our beliefs has been documented. We have been watching ourselves act, reflecting on that watching, and telling stories distilled through that reflection, for tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. That is all part of our attempts, individual and collective, to discover and articulate what it is that we believe. Part of the knowledge so generated is what is encapsulated in the fundamental teachings of our cultures, in ancient writings such as the Tao te Ching, or the aforementioned Vedic scriptures, or the Biblical stories. The Bible is, for better or worse, the foundational document of Western civilization (of Western values, Western morality, and Western conceptions of good and evil). It’s the product of processes that remain fundamentally beyond our comprehension. The Bible is a library composed of many books, each written and edited by many people. It’s a truly emergent document—a selected, sequenced and finally coherent story written by no one and everyone over many thousands of years. The Bible has been thrown up, out of the deep, by the collective human imagination, which is itself a product of unimaginable forces operating over unfathomable spans of time. Its careful, respectful study can reveal things to us about what we believe and how we do and should act that can be discovered in almost no other manner.

Old Testament God and New Testament God

The God of the Old Testament can appear harsh, judgmental, unpredictable and dangerous, particularly on cursory reading. The degree to which this is true has arguably been exaggerated by Christian commentators, intent on magnifying the distinction between the older and newer divisions of the Bible. There has been a price paid, however, for such plotting (and I mean that in both senses of the word): the tendency for modern people to think, when confronted with Jehovah, “I would never believe in a God like that.” But Old Testament God doesn’t much care what modern people think. He often didn’t care what Old Testament people thought, either (although He could be bargained with, to a surprising degree, as is particularly evident in the Abrahamic stories). Nonetheless, when His people strayed from the path—when they disobeyed His injunctions, violated His covenants, and broke His commandments—trouble was certain to follow. If you did not do what

Old Testament God demanded—whatever that might have been and however you might have tried to hide from it—you and your children and your children's children were in terrible, serious trouble.

It was realists who created, or noticed, Old Testament God. When the denizens of those ancient societies wandered carelessly down the wrong path, they ended up enslaved and miserable—sometimes for centuries—when they were not obliterated completely. Was that reasonable? Was that just? Was that fair? The authors of the Old Testament asked such questions with extreme caution and under very limited conditions. They assumed, instead, that the Creator of Being knew what he was doing, that all power was essentially with Him, and that His dictates should be carefully followed. They were wise. He was a Force of Nature. Is a hungry lion reasonable, fair or just? What kind of nonsensical question is that? The Old Testament Israelites and their forebears knew that God was not to be trifled with, and that whatever Hell the angry Deity might allow to be engendered if he was crossed was real. Having recently passed through a century defined by the bottomless horrors of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, we might realize the same thing.

New Testament God is often presented as a different character (although the Book of Revelation, with its Final Judgment, warns against any excessively naïve complacency). He is more the kindly Geppetto, master craftsman and benevolent father. He wants nothing for us but the best. He is all-loving and all-forgiving. Sure, He'll send you to Hell, if you misbehave badly enough. Fundamentally, however, he's the God of Love. That seems more optimistic, more naively welcoming, but (in precise proportion to that) less believable. In a world such as this—this hothouse of doom—who could buy such a story? The all-good God, in a post-Auschwitz world? It was for such reasons that the philosopher Nietzsche, perhaps the most astute critic ever to confront Christianity, considered New Testament God the worst literary crime in Western history. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he wrote:[76]

> In the Jewish 'Old Testament', the book of divine justice, there are men, things and speeches on such a grand style that Greek and Indian literature has nothing to compare with it. One stands with fear and reverence before those stupendous remains of what man was formerly, and one has sad thoughts about old Asia and its little out-pushed peninsula Europe.… To have bound up this New Testament (a kind of ROCOCO of taste in every respect) along with the Old Testament into one book, as the "Bible," as "The Book in Itself"

> is perhaps the greatest audacity and “sin against the spirit” which literary Europe has on its conscience.

Who but the most naive among us could posit that such an all-good, merciful Being ruled this so-terrible world? But something that seems incomprehensible to someone unseeing might be perfectly evident to someone who had opened his eyes.

Let’s return to the situation where your aim is being determined by something petty—your aforementioned envy of your boss. Because of that envy, the world you inhabit reveals itself as a place of bitterness, disappointment and spite. Imagine that you come to notice, and contemplate, and reconsider your unhappiness. Further, you determine to accept responsibility for it, and dare to posit that it might be something at least partly under your control. You crack open one eye, for a moment, and look. You ask for something better. You sacrifice your pettiness, repent of your envy, and open your heart. Instead of cursing the darkness, you let in a little light. You decide to aim for a better life—instead of a better office.

But you don’t stop there. You realize that it’s a mistake to aim for a better life, if it comes at the cost of worsening someone else’s. So, you get creative. You decide to play a more difficult game. You decide that you want a better life, in a manner that will also make the life of your family better. Or the life of your family, and your friends. Or the life of your family, and your friends, and the strangers who surround them. What about your enemies? Do you want to include them, too? You bloody well don’t know how to manage that. But you’ve read some history. You know how enmity compounds. So, you start to wish even your enemies well, at least in principle, although you are by no means yet a master of such sentiments.

And the direction of your sight changes. You see past the limitations that hemmed you in, unknowingly. New possibilities for your life emerge, and you work toward their realization. Your life indeed improves. And then you start to think, further: “Better? Perhaps that means better for me, and my family, and my friends—even for my enemies. But that’s not all it means. It means better today, in a manner that makes everything better tomorrow, and next week, and next year, and a decade from now, and a hundred years from now. And a thousand years from now. And forever.”

And then “better” means to aim at the Improvement of Being, with a capital “I’ and a capital “B.” Thinking all of this—realizing all of this—you

take a risk. You decide that you will start treating Old Testament God, with all His terrible and oft-arbitrary-seeming power, as if He could also be New Testament God (even though you understand the many ways in which that is absurd). In other words, you decide to act as if existence might be justified by its goodness—if only you behaved properly. And it is that decision, that declaration of existential faith, that allows you to overcome nihilism, and resentment, and arrogance. It is that declaration of faith that keeps hatred of Being, with all its attendant evils, at bay. And, as for such faith: it is not at all the will to believe things that you know perfectly well to be false. Faith is not the childish belief in magic. That is ignorance or even willful blindness. It is instead the realization that the tragic irrationalities of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of Being. It is simultaneously the will to dare set your sights at the unachievable, and to sacrifice everything, including (and most importantly) your life. You realize that you have, literally, nothing better to do. But how can you do all this?—assuming you are foolish enough to try.

You might start by *not thinking*—or, more accurately, but less trenchantly, by refusing to subjugate your faith to your current rationality, and its narrowness of view. This doesn't mean "make yourself stupid." It means the opposite. It means instead that you must quit manoeuvring and calculating and conniving and scheming and enforcing and demanding and avoiding and ignoring and punishing. It means you must place your old strategies aside. It means, instead, that you must pay attention, as you may never have paid attention before.

Pay Attention

Pay attention. Focus on your surroundings, physical and psychological. Notice something that bothers you, that concerns you, that will not let you be, which you *could* fix, that you *would* fix. You can find such somethings by asking yourself (as if you genuinely want to know) three questions: "What is it that is bothering me?" "Is that something I could fix?" and "Would I actually be willing to fix it?" If you find that the answer is "no," to any or all of the questions, then look elsewhere. Aim lower. Search until you find something that bothers you, that you could fix, that you would fix, and then fix it. That might be enough for the day.

Maybe there is a stack of paper on your desk, and you have been avoiding it. You won't even really look at it, when you walk into your room. There are terrible things lurking there: tax forms, and bills and letters from people wanting things you aren't sure you can deliver. Notice your fear, and have some sympathy for it. Maybe there are snakes in that pile of paper. Maybe you'll get bitten. Maybe there are even hydras lurking there. You'll cut off one head, and seven more will grow. How could you possibly cope with that?

You could ask yourself, "Is there anything at all that I might be willing to do about that pile of paper? Would I look, maybe, at one part of it? For twenty minutes?" Maybe the answer will be, "No!" But you might look for ten, or even for five (and if not that, for one). Start there. You will soon find that the entire pile shrinks in significance, merely because you have looked at part of it. And you'll find that the whole thing is made of parts. What if you allowed yourself a glass of wine with dinner, or curled up on the sofa and read, or watched a stupid movie, as a reward? What if you instructed your wife, or your husband, to say "good job" after you fixed whatever you fixed? Would that motivate you? The people from whom thanks you want might not be very proficient in offering it, to begin with, but that shouldn't stop you. People can learn, even if they are very unskilled at the beginning. Ask yourself what you would require to be motivated to undertake the job, honestly, and listen to the answer. Don't tell yourself, "I shouldn't need to do that to motivate myself." What do you know about yourself? You are, on the one hand, the most complex thing in the entire universe, and on the other, someone who can't even set the clock on your microwave. Don't over-estimate your self-knowledge.

Let the tasks for the day announce themselves for your contemplation. Maybe you can do this in the morning, as you sit on the edge of your bed. Maybe you can try, the night before, when you are preparing to sleep. Ask yourself for a voluntary contribution. If you ask nicely, and listen carefully, and don't try any treachery, you might be offered one. Do this every day, for a while. Then do it for the rest of your life. Soon you will find yourself in a different situation. Now you will be asking yourself, habitually, "What could I do, that I would do, to make Life a little better?" You are not dictating to yourself what "better" must be. You are not being a totalitarian, or a utopian, even to yourself, because you have learned from the Nazis and the Soviets and the Maoists and from your own experience that being a totalitarian is a

bad thing. Aim high. Set your sights on the betterment of Being. Align yourself, in your soul, with Truth and the Highest Good. There is habitable order to establish and beauty to bring into existence. There is evil to overcome, suffering to ameliorate, and yourself to better.

It is this, in my reading, that is the culminating ethic of the canon of the West. It is this, furthermore, that is communicated by those eternally confusing, glowing stanzas from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the essence, in some sense, of the wisdom of the New Testament. This is the attempt of the Spirit of Mankind to transform the understanding of ethics from the initial, necessary Thou Shalt Not of the child and the Ten Commandments into the fully articulated, positive vision of the true individual. This is the expression not merely of admirable self-control and self-mastery but of the fundamental desire to set the world right. This is not the cessation of sin, but sin's opposite, good itself. The Sermon on the Mount outlines the true nature of man, and the proper aim of mankind: concentrate on the day, so that you can live in the present, and attend completely and properly to what is right in front of you—but do that only after you have decided to let what is within shine forth, so that it can justify Being and illuminate the world. Do that only after you have determined to sacrifice whatever it is that must be sacrificed so that you can pursue the highest good.

> Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:
>
> And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
>
> Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?
>
> Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?
>
> (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.
>
> But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.
>
> Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (Luke 12: 22–34)

Realization is dawning. Instead of playing the tyrant, therefore, you are paying attention. You are telling the truth, instead of manipulating the world. You are negotiating, instead of playing the martyr or the tyrant. You no longer have to be envious, because you no longer know that someone else truly has it better. You no longer have to be frustrated, because you have

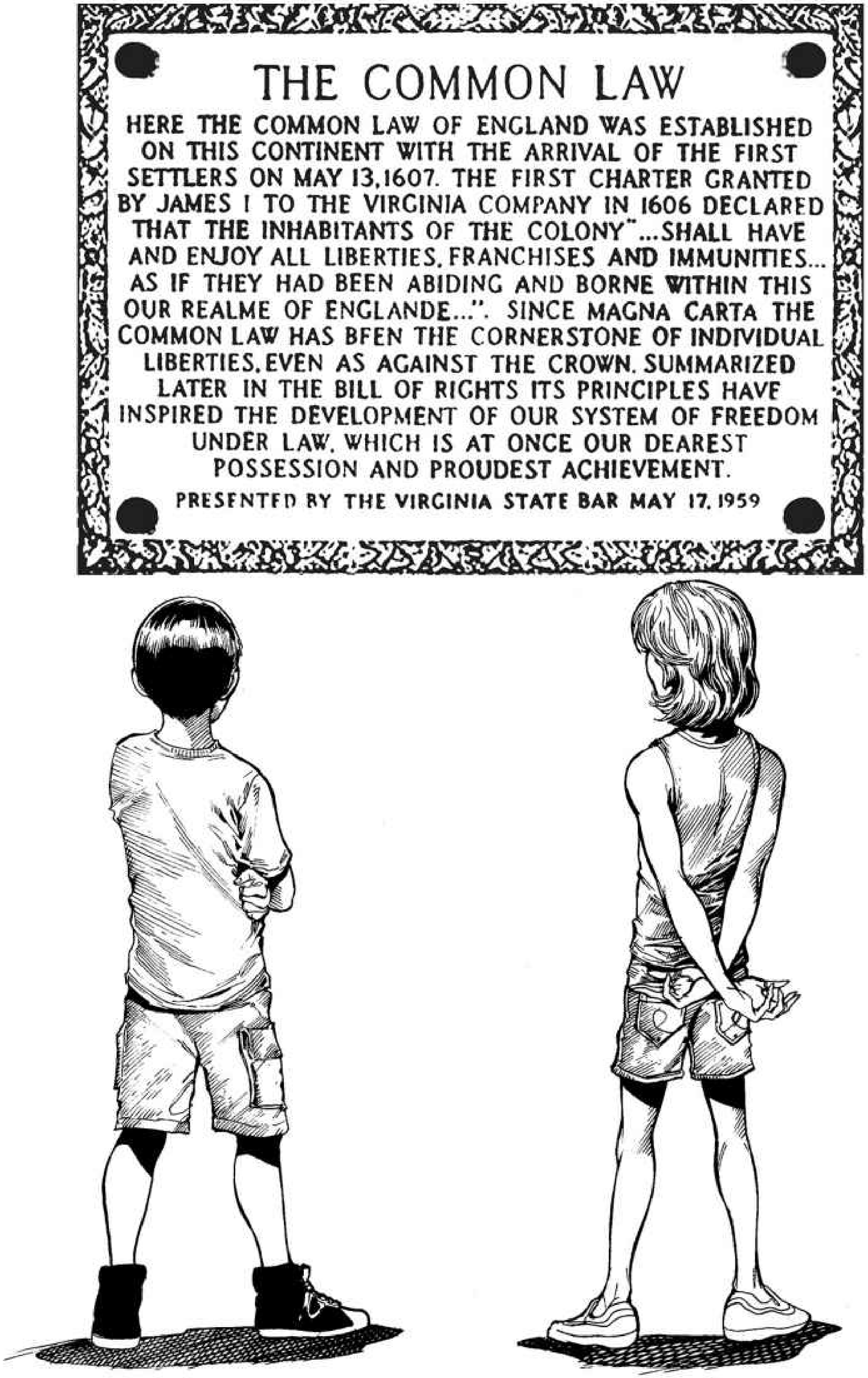
learned to aim low, and to be patient. You are discovering who you are, and what you want, and what you are willing to do. You are finding that the solutions to your particular problems have to be tailored to you, personally and precisely. You are less concerned with the actions of other people, because you have plenty to do yourself.

Attend to the day, but aim at the highest good.

Now, your trajectory is heavenward. That makes you hopeful. Even a man on a sinking ship can be happy when he clambers aboard a lifeboat! And who knows where he might go, in the future. To journey happily may well be better than to arrive successfully.…

Ask, and ye shall receive. Knock, and the door will open. If you ask, as if you want, and knock, as if you want to enter, you may be offered the chance to improve your life, a little; a lot; completely—and with that improvement, some progress will be made in Being itself.

Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.


THE COMMON LAW
HERE THE COMMON LAW OF ENGLAND WAS ESTABLISHED ON THIS CONTINENT WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST SETTLERS ON MAY 13, 1607. THE FIRST CHARTER GRANTED BY JAMES I TO THE VIRGINIA COMPANY IN 1606 DECLARED THAT THE INHABITANTS OF THE COLONY "...SHALL HAVE AND ENJOY ALL LIBERTIES, FRANCHISES AND IMMUNITIES... AS IF THEY HAD BEEN ABIDING AND BORNE WITHIN THIS OUR REALME OF ENGLANDE...". SINCE MAGNA CARTA THE COMMON LAW HAS BFEN THE CORNERSTONE OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES, EVEN AS AGAINST THE CROWN. SUMMARIZED LATER IN THE BILL OF RIGHTS ITS PRINCIPLES HAVE INSPIRED THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR SYSTEM OF FREEDOM UNDER LAW, WHICH IS AT ONCE OUR DEAREST POSSESSION AND PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENT.
PRESENTED BY THE VIRGINIA STATE BAR MAY 17, 1959

RULE 5

DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN DO ANYTHING THAT MAKES YOU DISLIKE THEM

ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT OK

Recently, I watched a three-year-old boy trail his mother and father slowly through a crowded airport. He was screaming violently at five-second intervals—and, more important, he was doing it voluntarily. He wasn't at the end of this tether. As a parent, I could tell from the tone. He was irritating his parents and hundreds of other people to gain attention. Maybe he needed something. But that was no way to get it, and his parents should have let him know that. You might object that "perhaps they were worn out, and jet-lagged, after a long trip." But thirty seconds of carefully directed problem-solving would have brought the shameful episode to a halt. More thoughtful parents would not have let someone they truly cared for become the object of a crowd's contempt.

I have also watched a couple, unable or unwilling to say no to their two-year-old, obliged to follow closely behind him everywhere he went, every moment of what was supposed to be an enjoyable social visit, because he misbehaved so badly when not micro-managed that he could not be given a second of genuine freedom without risk. The desire of his parents to let their child act without correction on every impulse perversely produced precisely the opposite effect: they deprived him instead of every opportunity to engage in independent action. Because they did not dare to teach him what "No" means, he had no conception of the reasonable limits enabling maximal toddler autonomy. It was a classic example of too much chaos breeding too much order (and the inevitable reversal). I have, similarly, seen parents rendered unable to engage in adult conversation at a dinner party because their children, four and five, dominated the social scene, eating the centres

out of all the sliced bread, subjecting everyone to their juvenile tyranny, while mom and dad watched, embarrassed and bereft of the ability to intervene.

When my now-adult daughter was a child, another child once hit her on the head with a metal toy truck. I watched that same child, one year later, viciously push his younger sister backwards over a fragile glass-surfaced coffee table. His mother picked him up, immediately afterward (but not her frightened daughter), and told him in hushed tones not to do such things, while she patted him comfortingly in a manner clearly indicative of approval. She was out to produce a little God-Emperor of the Universe. That's the unstated goal of many a mother, including many who consider themselves advocates for full gender equality. Such women will object vociferously to any command uttered by an adult male, but will trot off in seconds to make their progeny a peanut-butter sandwich if he demands it while immersed self-importantly in a video game. The future mates of such boys have every reason to hate their mothers-in-law. Respect for women? That's for other boys, other men—not for their dear sons.

Something of the same sort may underlie, in part, the preference for male children seen most particularly in places such as India, Pakistan and China, where sex-selective abortion is widely practised. The Wikipedia entry for that practice attributes its existence to "cultural norms" favouring male over female children. (I cite Wikipedia because it is collectively written and edited and, therefore, the perfect place to find accepted wisdom.) But there's no evidence that such ideas are strictly cultural. There are plausible psycho-biological reasons for the evolution of such an attitude, and they're not pretty, from a modern, egalitarian perspective. If circumstances force you to put all your eggs into one basket, so to speak, a son is a better bet, by the strict standards of evolutionary logic, where the proliferation of your genes is all that matters. Why?

Well, a reproductively successful daughter might gain you eight or nine children. The Holocaust survivor Yitta Schwartz, a star in this regard, had three generations of direct descendants who matched such performance. She was the ancestor of almost two thousand people by the time of her death in 2010.[77] But the sky is truly the limit with a reproductively successful son. Sex with multiple female partners is his ticket to exponential reproduction

(given our species' practical limitation to single births). Rumour has it that the actor Warren Beatty and the athlete Wilt Chamberlain each bedded multiple thousands of women (something not unknown, as well, among rock stars). They didn't produce children in those numbers. Modern birth control limits that. But similar celebrity types in the past have done so. The forefather of the Qing dynasty, Giocangga (circa 1550), for example, is the male-line ancestor of a million and a half people in northeastern China.[78] The medieval Uí Néill dynasty produced up to three million male descendants, localized mainly in northwestern Ireland and the US, through Irish emigration.[79] And the king of them all, Genghis Khan, conqueror of much of Asia, is forefather of 8 percent of the men in Central Asia—sixteen million male descendants, 34 generations later.[80] So, from a deep, biological perspective there are reasons why parents might favour sons sufficiently to eliminate female fetuses, although I am not claiming direct causality, nor suggesting a lack of other, more culturally-dependent reasons.

Preferential treatment awarded a son during development might even help produce an attractive, well-rounded, confident man. This happened in the case of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, by his own account: "A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success."[81] Fair enough. But "feeling of a conqueror" can all too easily become "actual conqueror." Genghis Khan's outstanding reproductive success certainly came at the cost of any success whatsoever for others (including the dead millions of Chinese, Persians, Russians and Hungarians). Spoiling a son might therefore work well from the standpoint of the "selfish gene" (allowing the favoured child's genes to replicate themselves in innumerable offspring), to use the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' famous expression. But it can make for a dark, painful spectacle in the here and now, and mutate into something indescribably dangerous.

None of this means that all mothers favour all sons over their daughters (or that daughters are not sometimes favoured over sons, or that fathers don't sometimes favor their sons). Other factors can clearly dominate. Sometimes, for example, unconscious hatred (sometimes not-so-unconscious, either) overrides any concern a parent might have for any child, regardless of gender or personality or situation. I saw a four-year old boy allowed to go hungry on

a regular basis. His nanny had been injured, and he was being cycled through the neighbours for temporary care. When his mother dropped him off at our house, she indicated that he wouldn't eat at all, all day. "That's OK," she said. It wasn't OK (in case that's not obvious). This was the same four-year-old boy who clung to my wife for hours in absolute desperation and total commitment, when she tenaciously, persistently and mercifully managed to feed him an entire lunch-time meal, rewarding him throughout for his cooperation, and refusing to let him fail. He started out with a closed mouth, sitting with all of us at the dining room table, my wife and I, our two kids, and two neighbourhood kids we looked after during the day. She put the spoon in front of him, waiting patiently, persistently, while he moved his head back and forth, refusing it entry, using defensive methods typical of a recalcitrant and none-too-well-attended two-year old.

She didn't let him fail. She patted him on the head every time he managed a mouthful, telling him sincerely that he was a "good boy" when he did so. She did think he was a good boy. He was a cute, damaged kid. Ten not-too-painful minutes later he finished his meal. We were all watching intently. It was a drama of life and death.

"Look," she said, holding up his bowl. "You finished all of it." This boy, who was standing in the corner, voluntarily and unhappily, when I first saw him; who wouldn't interact with the other kids, who frowned chronically, who wouldn't respond to me when I tickled and prodded him, trying to get him to play—this boy broke immediately into a wide, radiant smile. It brought joy to everyone at the table. Twenty years later, writing it down today, it still brings me to tears. Afterward, he followed my wife around like a puppy for the rest of the day, refusing to let her out of his sight. When she sat down, he jumped in her lap, cuddling in, opening himself back up to the world, searching desperately for the love he had been continually denied. Later in the day, but far too soon, his mother reappeared. She came down the stairs into the room we all occupied. "Oh, SuperMom," she uttered, resentfully, seeing her son curled up in my wife's lap. Then she departed, black, murderous heart unchanged, doomed child in hand. She was a psychologist. The things you can see, with even a single open eye. It's no wonder that people want to stay blind.

Everybody Hates Arithmetic

My clinical clients frequently come to me to discuss their day-to-day familial problems. Such quotidian concerns are insidious. Their habitual and predictable occurrence makes them appear trivial. But that appearance of triviality is deceptive: it is the things that occur every single day that truly make up our lives, and time spent the same way over and again adds up at an alarming rate. One father recently spoke with me about the trouble he was having putting his son to sleep at night[fn1]—a ritual that typically involved about three-quarters of an hour of fighting. We did the arithmetic. Forty-five minutes a day, seven days a week—that's three hundred minutes, or five hours, a week. Five hours for each of the four weeks of a month—that's twenty hours per month. Twenty hours a month for twelve months is two hundred and forty hours a year. That's a month and a half of standard forty-hour work weeks.

My client was spending a month and a half of work weeks per year fighting ineffectually and miserably with his son. Needless to say, both were suffering for it. No matter how good your intentions, or how sweet and tolerant your temperament, you will not maintain good relations with someone you fight with for a month and a half of work weeks per year. Resentment will inevitably build. Even if it doesn't, all that wasted, unpleasant time could clearly be spent in more productive and useful and less stressful and more enjoyable activity. How are such situations to be understood? Where does the fault lie, in child or in parent? In nature or society? And what, if anything, is to be done?

Some localize all such problems in the adult, whether in the parent or broader society. "There are no bad children," such people think, "only bad parents." When the idealized image of an unsullied child is brought to mind, this notion appears fully justified. The beauty, openness, joy, trust and capacity for love characterizing children makes it easy to attribute full culpability to the adults on the scene. But such an attitude is dangerously and naively romantic. It's too one-sided, in the case of parents granted a particularly difficult son or daughter. It's also not for the best that all human corruption is uncritically laid at society's feet. That conclusion merely displaces the problem, back in time. It explains nothing, and solves no problems. If society is corrupt, but not the individuals within it, then where

did the corruption originate? How is it propagated? It’s a one-sided, deeply ideological theory.

Even more problematic is the insistence logically stemming from this presumption of social corruption that all individual problems, no matter how rare, must be solved by cultural restructuring, no matter how radical. Our society faces the increasing call to deconstruct its stabilizing traditions to include smaller and smaller numbers of people who do not or will not fit into the categories upon which even our perceptions are based. This is not a good thing. Each person’s private trouble cannot be solved by a social revolution, because revolutions are destabilizing and dangerous. We have learned to live together and organize our complex societies slowly and incrementally, over vast stretches of time, and we do not understand with sufficient exactitude why what we are doing works. Thus, altering our ways of social being carelessly in the name of some ideological shibboleth (diversity springs to mind) is likely to produce far more trouble than good, given the suffering that even small revolutions generally produce.

Was it really a good thing, for example, to so dramatically liberalize the divorce laws in the 1960s? It’s not clear to me that the children whose lives were destabilized by the hypothetical freedom this attempt at liberation introduced would say so. Horror and terror lurk behind the walls provided so wisely by our ancestors. We tear them down at our peril. We skate, unconsciously, on thin ice, with deep, cold waters below, where unimaginable monsters lurk.

I see today’s parents as terrified by their children, not least because they have been deemed the proximal agents of this hypothetical social tyranny, and simultaneously denied credit for their role as benevolent and necessary agents of discipline, order and conventionality. They dwell uncomfortably and self-consciously in the shadow of the all-too-powerful shadow of the adolescent ethos of the 1960s, a decade whose excesses led to a general denigration of adulthood, an unthinking disbelief in the existence of competent power, and the inability to distinguish between the chaos of immaturity and responsible freedom. This has increased parental sensitivity to the short-term emotional suffering of their children, while heightening their fear of damaging their children to a painful and counterproductive degree. Better this than the reverse, you might argue—but there are catastrophes lurking at the extremes of every moral continuum.

The Ignoble Savage

It has been said that every individual is the conscious or unconscious follower of some influential philosopher. The belief that children have an intrinsically unsullied spirit, damaged only by culture and society, is derived in no small part from the eighteenth-century Genevan French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[82] Rousseau was a fervent believer in the corrupting influence of human society and private ownership alike. He claimed that nothing was so gentle and wonderful as man in his pre-civilized state. At precisely the same time, noting his inability as a father, he abandoned five of his children to the tender and fatal mercies of the orphanages of the time.

The noble savage Rousseau described, however, was an ideal—an abstraction, archetypal and religious—and not the flesh-and-blood reality he supposed. The mythologically perfect Divine Child permanently inhabits our imagination. He's the potential of youth, the newborn hero, the wronged innocent, and the long-lost son of the rightful king. He's the intimations of immortality that accompany our earliest experiences. He's Adam, the perfect man, walking without sin with God in the Garden before the Fall. But human beings are evil, as well as good, and the darkness that dwells forever in our souls is also there in no small part in our younger selves. In general, people improve with age, rather than worsening, becoming kinder, more conscientious, and more emotionally stable as they mature.[83] Bullying at the sheer and often terrible intensity of the schoolyard[84] rarely manifests itself in grown-up society. William Golding's dark and anarchistic *Lord of the Flies* is a classic for a reason.

Furthermore, there is plenty of direct evidence that the horrors of human behaviour cannot be so easily attributed to history and society. This was discovered most painfully, perhaps, by the primatologist Jane Goodall, beginning in 1974, when she learned that her beloved chimpanzees were capable of and willing to murder each other (to use the terminology appropriate to humans).[85] Because of its shocking nature and great anthropological significance, she kept her observations secret for years, fearing that her contact with the animals had led them to manifest unnatural behaviour. Even after she published her account, many refused to believe it.

It soon became obvious, however, that what she observed was by no means rare.

Bluntly put: chimpanzees conduct inter-tribal warfare. Furthermore, they do it with almost unimaginable brutality. The typical full-grown chimp is more than twice as strong as a comparable human being, despite their smaller size.[86] Goodall reported with some terror the proclivity of the chimps she studied to snap strong steel cables and levers.[87] Chimps can literally tear each other to pieces—and they do. Human societies and their complex technologies cannot be blamed for that.[88] "Often when I woke in the night," she wrote, "horrific pictures sprang unbidden to my mind—Satan [a long-observed chimp] cupping his hand below Sniff's chin to drink the blood that welled from a great wound in his face … Jomeo tearing a strip of skin from Dé's thigh; Figan, charging and hitting, again and again, the stricken, quivering body of Goliath, one of his childhood heroes."[89] Small gangs of adolescent chimps, mostly male, roam the borders of their territory. If they encounter foreigners (even chimps they once knew, who had broken away from the now-too-large group) and, if they outnumber them, the gang will mob and destroy them, without mercy. Chimps don't have much of a super-ego, and it is prudent to remember that the human capacity for self-control may also be overestimated. Careful perusal of book as shocking and horrific as Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking*,[90] which describes the brutal decimation of that Chinese city by the invading Japanese, will disenchant even a committed romantic. And the less said about Unit 731, a covert Japanese biological warfare research unit established at that time, the better. Read about it at your peril. You have been warned.

Hunter-gatherers, too, are much more murderous than their urban, industrialized counterparts, despite their communal lives and localized cultures. The yearly rate of homicide in the modern UK is about 1 per 100,000.[91] It's four to five times higher in the US, and about ninety times higher in Honduras, which has the highest rate recorded of any modern nation. But the evidence strongly suggests that human beings have become more peaceful, rather than less so, as time has progressed and societies became larger and more organized. The !Kung bushmen of Africa, romanticized in the 1950s by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas as "the harmless people,"[92] had a yearly murder rate of 40 per 100,000, which declined by

more than 30% once they became subject to state authority.[93] This is a very instructive example of complex social structures serving to reduce, not exacerbate, the violent tendencies of human beings. Yearly rates of 300 per 100,000 have been reported for the Yanomami of Brazil, famed for their aggression—but the stats don't max out there. The denizens of Papua, New Guinea, kill each other at yearly rates ranging from 140 to 1000 per 100,000.[94] However, the record appears to be held by the Kato, an indigeneous people of California, 1450 of whom per 100,000 met a violent death circa 1840.[95]

Because children, like other human beings, are not only good, they cannot simply be left to their own devices, untouched by society, and bloom into perfection. Even dogs must be socialized if they are to become acceptable members of the pack—and children are much more complex than dogs. This means that they are much more likely to go complexly astray if they are not trained, disciplined and properly encouraged. This means that it is not just wrong to attribute all the violent tendencies of human beings to the pathologies of social structure. It's wrong enough to be virtually backward. The vital process of socialization prevents much harm and fosters much good. Children must be shaped and informed, or they cannot thrive. This fact is reflected starkly in their behavior: kids are utterly desperate for attention from both peers and adults because such attention, which renders them effective and sophisticated communal players, is vitally necessary.

Children can be damaged as much or more by a lack of incisive attention as they are by abuse, mental or physical. This is damage by omission, rather than commission, but it is no less severe and long-lasting. Children are damaged when their "mercifully" inattentive parents fail to make them sharp and observant and awake and leave them, instead, in an unconscious and undifferentiated state. Children are damaged when those charged with their care, afraid of any conflict or upset, no longer dare to correct them, and leave them without guidance. I can recognize such children on the street. They are doughy and unfocused and vague. They are leaden and dull instead of golden and bright. They are uncarved blocks, trapped in a perpetual state of waiting-to-be.

Such children are chronically ignored by their peers. This is because they are not fun to play with. Adults tend to manifest the same attitude (although

they will deny it desperately when pressed). When I worked in daycare centres, early in my career, the comparatively neglected children would come to me desperately, in their fumbling, half-formed manner, with no sense of proper distance and no attentive playfulness. They would flop, nearby—or directly on my lap, no matter what I was doing—driven inexorably by the powerful desire for adult attention, the necessary catalyst for further development. It was very difficult not to react with annoyance, even disgust, to such children and their too-prolonged infantilism—difficult not to literally push them aside—even though I felt very badly for them, and understood their predicament well. I believe that response, harsh and terrible though it may be, was an almost universally-experienced internal warning signal indicating the comparative danger of establishing a relationship with a poorly socialized child: the likelihood of immediate and inappropriate dependence (which should have been the responsibility of the parent) and the tremendous demand of time and resources that accepting such dependence would necessitate. Confronted with such a situation, potentially friendly peers and interested adults are much more likely to turn their attention to interacting with other children whose cost/benefit ratio, to speak bluntly, would be much lower.

Parent or Friend

The neglect and mistreatment that is part and parcel of poorly structured or even entirely absent disciplinary approaches can be deliberate—motivated by explicit, conscious (if misguided) parental motives. But more often than not, modern parents are simply paralyzed by the fear that they will no longer be liked or even loved by their children if they chastise them for any reason. They want their children's friendship above all, and are willing to sacrifice respect to get it. This is not good. A child will have many friends, but only two parents—if that—and parents are more, not less, than friends. Friends have very limited authority to correct. Every parent therefore needs to learn to tolerate the momentary anger or even hatred directed towards them by their children, after necessary corrective action has been taken, as the capacity of children to perceive or care about long-term consequences is very limited. Parents are the arbiters of society. They teach children how to behave so that

other people will be able to interact meaningfully and productively with them.

It is an act of responsibility to discipline a child. It is not anger at misbehavior. It is not revenge for a misdeed. It is instead a careful combination of mercy and long-term judgment. Proper discipline requires effort—indeed, is virtually synonymous with effort. It is difficult to pay careful attention to children. It is difficult to figure out what is wrong and what is right and why. It is difficult to formulate just and compassionate strategies of discipline, and to negotiate their application with others deeply involved in a child's care. Because of this combination of responsibility and difficulty, any suggestion that all constraints placed on children are damaging can be perversely welcome. Such a notion, once accepted, allows adults who should know better to abandon their duty to serve as agents of enculturation and pretend that doing so is good for children. It's a deep and pernicious act of self-deception. It's lazy, cruel and inexcusable. And our proclivity to rationalize does not end there.

We assume that rules will irremediably inhibit what would otherwise be the boundless and intrinsic creativity of our children, even though the scientific literature clearly indicates, first, that creativity beyond the trivial is shockingly rare[96] and, second, that strict limitations facilitate rather than inhibit creative achievement.[97] Belief in the purely destructive element of rules and structure is frequently conjoined with the idea that children will make good choices about when to sleep and what to eat, if their perfect natures are merely allowed to manifest themselves. These are equally ungrounded assumptions. Children are perfectly capable of attempting to subsist on hot dogs, chicken fingers and Froot Loops if doing so will attract attention, provide power, or shield them from trying anything new. Instead of going to bed wisely and peacefully, children will fight night-time unconsciousness until they are staggered by fatigue. They are also perfectly willing to provoke adults, while exploring the complex contours of the social environment, just like juvenile chimps harassing the adults in their troupes.[98] Observing the consequences of teasing and taunting enables chimp and child alike to discover the limits of what might otherwise be a too-unstructured and terrifying freedom. Such limits, when discovered, provide security, even if their detection causes momentary disappointment or frustration.

I remember taking my daughter to the playground once when she was about two. She was playing on the monkey bars, hanging in mid-air. A particularly provocative little monster of about the same age was standing above her on the same bar she was gripping. I watched him move towards her. Our eyes locked. He slowly and deliberately stepped on her hands, with increasing force, over and over, as he stared me down. He knew exactly what he was doing. Up yours, Daddy-O—that was his philosophy. He had already concluded that adults were contemptible, and that he could safely defy them. (Too bad, then, that he was destined to become one.) That was the hopeless future his parents had saddled him with. To his great and salutary shock, I picked him bodily off the playground structure, and threw him thirty feet down the field.

No, I didn't. I just took my daughter somewhere else. But it would have been better for him if I had.

Imagine a toddler repeatedly striking his mother in the face. Why would he do such a thing? It's a stupid question. It's unacceptably naive. The answer is obvious. To dominate his mother. To see if he can get away with it. Violence, after all, is no mystery. It's peace that's the mystery. Violence is the default. It's easy. It's peace that is difficult: learned, inculcated, earned. (People often get basic psychological questions backwards. Why do people take drugs? Not a mystery. It's why they don't take them all the time that's the mystery. Why do people suffer from anxiety? That's not a mystery. How is that people can ever be calm? There's the mystery. We're breakable and mortal. A million things can go wrong, in a million ways. We should be terrified out of our skulls at every second. But we're not. The same can be said for depression, laziness and criminality.)

If I can hurt and overpower you, then I can do exactly what I want, when I want, even when you're around. I can torment you, to appease my curiosity. I can take the attention away from you, and dominate you. I can steal your toy. Children hit first because aggression is innate, although more dominant in some individuals and less in others, and, second, because aggression facilitates desire. It's foolish to assume that such behaviour must be learned. A snake does not have to be taught to strike. It's in the nature of the beast. Two-year-olds, statistically speaking, are the most violent of people.[99] They kick, hit and bite, and they steal the property of others. They do so to explore,

to express outrage and frustration, and to gratify their impulsive desires. More importantly, for our purposes, they do so to discover the true limits of permissible behaviour. How else are they ever going to puzzle out what is acceptable? Infants are like blind people, searching for a wall. They have to push forward, and test, to see where the actual boundaries lie (and those are too-seldom where they are said to be).

Consistent correction of such action indicates the limits of acceptable aggression to the child. Its absence merely heightens curiosity—so the child will hit and bite and kick, if he is aggressive and dominant, until something indicates a limit. How hard can I hit Mommy? Until she objects. Given that, correction is better sooner than later (if the desired end result of the parent is not to be hit). Correction also helps the child learn that hitting others is a sub-optimal social strategy. Without that correction, no child is going to undergo the effortful process of organizing and regulating their impulses, so that those impulses can coexist, without conflict, within the psyche of the child, and in the broader social world. It is no simple matter to organize a mind.

My son was particularly ornery when he was a toddler. When my daughter was little, I could paralyze her into immobility with an evil glance. Such an intervention had no effect at all on my son. He had my wife (who is no pushover) stymied at the dinner table by the time he was nine months of age. He fought her for control over the spoon. “Good!” we thought. We didn’t want to feed him one more minute than necessary anyway. But the little blighter would only eat three or four mouthfuls. Then he would play. He would stir his food around in his bowl. He would drop bits of it over the high chair table top, and watch as it fell on the floor below. No problem. He was exploring. But then he wasn’t eating enough. Then, because he wasn’t eating enough, he wasn’t sleeping enough. Then his midnight crying was waking his parents. Then they were getting grumpy and out of sorts. He was frustrating his mother, and she was taking it out on me. The trajectory wasn’t good.

After a few days of this degeneration, I decided to take the spoon back. I prepared for war. I set aside sufficient time. A patient adult can defeat a two-year-old, hard as that is to believe. As the saying goes: “Old age and treachery can always overcome youth and skill.” This is partly because time lasts forever, when you’re two. Half an hour for me was a week for my son. I assured myself of victory. He was stubborn and horrible. But I could be worse. We sat down, face to face, bowl in front of him. It was *High Noon*. He

knew it, and I knew it. He picked up the spoon. I took it from him, and spooned up a delicious mouthful of mush. I moved it deliberately towards his mouth. He eyed me in precisely the same manner as the playground foot monster. He curled his lips downward into a tight frown, rejecting all entry. I chased his mouth around with the spoon as he twisted his head around in tight circles.

But I had more tricks up my sleeve. I poked him in the chest, with my free hand, in a manner calculated to annoy. He didn't budge. I did it again. And again. And again. Not hard—but not in a manner to be ignored, either. Ten or so pokes letter, he opened his mouth, planning to emit a sound of outrage. Hah! His mistake. I deftly inserted the spoon. He tried, gamely, to force out the offending food with his tongue. But I know how to deal with that, too. I just placed my forefinger horizontally across his lips. Some came out. But some was swallowed, too. Score one for Dad. I gave him a pat on the head, and told him that he was a good boy. And I meant it. When someone does something you are trying to get them to do, reward them. No grudge after victory. An hour later, it was all over. There was outrage. There was some wailing. My wife had to leave the room. The stress was too much. But food was eaten by child. My son collapsed, exhausted, on my chest. We had a nap together. And he liked me a lot better when he woke up than he had before he was disciplined.

This was something I commonly observed when we went head to head—and not only with him. A little later we entered into a babysitting swap with another couple. All the kids would get together at one house. Then one pair of parents would go out to dinner, or a movie, and leave the other pair to watch the children, who were all under three. One evening, another set of parents joined us. I was unfamiliar with their son, a large, strong boy of two.

"He won't sleep," said his father. "After you put him to bed, he will crawl out of his bed, and come downstairs. We usually put on an Elmo video and let him watch it."

"There's no damn way I'm rewarding a recalcitrant child for unacceptable behaviour," I thought, "and I'm certainly not showing anyone any Elmo video." I always hated that creepy, whiny puppet. He was a disgrace to Jim Henson's legacy. So reward-by-Elmo was not on the table. I didn't say anything, of course. There is just no talking to parents about their children—until they are ready to listen.

Two hours later, we put the kids to bed. Four of the five went promptly to sleep—but not the Muppet aficionado. I had placed him in a crib, however, so he couldn't escape. But he could still howl, and that's exactly what he did. That was tricky. It was good strategy on his part. It was annoying, and it threatened to wake up all the other kids, who would then also start to howl. Score one for the kid. So, I journeyed into the bedroom. "Lie down," I said. That produced no effect. "Lie down," I said, "or I will lay you down." Reasoning with kids isn't often of too much use, particularly under such circumstances, but I believe in fair warning. Of course, he didn't lie down. He howled again, for effect.

Kids do this frequently. Scared parents think that a crying child is always sad or hurt. This is simply not true. Anger is one of the most common reasons for crying. Careful analysis of the musculature patterns of crying children has confirmed this.[100] Anger-crying and fear-or-sadness crying do not look the same. They also don't sound the same, and can be distinguished with careful attention. Anger-crying is often an act of dominance, and should be dealt with as such. I lifted him up, and laid him down. Gently. Patiently. But firmly. He got up. I laid him down. He got up. I laid him down. He got up. This time, I laid him down, and kept my hand on his back. He struggled, mightily, but ineffectually. He was, after all, only one-tenth my size. I could take him with one hand. So, I kept him down and spoke calmly to him and told him he was a good boy and that he should relax. I gave him a soother and pounded gently on his back. He started to relax. His eyes began to close. I removed my hand.

He promptly got to his feet. I was impressed. The kid had spirit! I lifted him up, and laid him down, again. "Lie down, monster," I said. I pounded his back gently some more. Some kids find that soothing. He was getting tired. He was ready to capitulate. He closed his eyes. I got to my feet, and headed quietly and quickly to the door. I glanced back, to check his position, one last time. He was back on his feet. I pointed my finger at him. "Down, monster," I said, and I meant it. He went down like a shot. I closed the door. We liked each other. Neither my wife nor I heard a peep out of him for the rest of the night.

"How was the kid?" his father asked me when he got home, much later that night. "Good," I said. "No problem at all. He's asleep right now."

“Did he get up?” said his father.

“No,” I said. “He slept the whole time.”

Dad looked at me. He wanted to know. But he didn’t ask. And I didn’t tell.

Don’t cast pearls before swine, as the old saying goes. And you might think that’s harsh. But training your child not to sleep, and rewarding him with the antics of a creepy puppet? That’s harsh too. You pick your poison, and I’ll pick mine.

Discipline and Punish

Modern parents are terrified of two frequently juxtaposed words: discipline and punish. They evoke images of prisons, soldiers and jackboots. The distance between disciplinarian and tyrant or punishment and torture is, indeed, easily traversed. *Discipline* and *punish* must be handled with care. The fear is unsurprising. But both are necessary. They can be applied unconsciously or consciously, badly or well, but there is no escaping their use.

It’s not that it’s impossible to discipline with reward. In fact, rewarding good behaviour can be very effective. The most famous of all behavioural psychologists, B.F. Skinner, was a great advocate of this approach. He was expert at it. He taught pigeons to play ping-pong, although they only rolled the ball back and forth by pecking it with their beaks.[101] But they were pigeons. So even though they played badly, it was still pretty good. Skinner even taught his birds to pilot missiles during the Second World War, in Project Pigeon (later Orcon).[102] He got a long way, before the invention of electronic guidance systems rendered his efforts obsolete.

Skinner observed the animals he was training to perform such acts with exceptional care. Any actions that approximated what he was aiming at were immediately followed by a reward of just the right size: not small enough to be inconsequential, and not so large that it devalued future rewards. Such an approach can be used with children, and works very well. Imagine that you would like your toddler to help set the table. It’s a useful skill. You’d like him better if he could do it. It would be good for his (shudder) self-esteem. So, you break the target behaviour down into its component parts. One element of setting the table is carrying a plate from the cupboard to the table. Even that might be too complex. Perhaps your child has only been walking a

few months. He’s still wobbly and unreliable. So, you start his training by handing him a plate and having him hand it back. A pat on the head could follow. You might turn it into a game. Pass with your left. Switch to your right. Circle around your back. Then you might give him a plate and take a few steps backward so that he has to traverse a few steps before giving it back. Train him to become a plate-handling virtuoso. Don’t leave him trapped in his klutz-dom.

You can teach virtually anyone anything with such an approach. First, figure out what you want. Then, watch the people around you like a hawk. Finally, whenever you see anything a bit more like what you want, swoop in (hawk, remember) and deliver a reward. Your daughter has been very reserved since she became a teenager. You wish she would talk more. That’s the target: more communicative daughter. One morning, over breakfast, she shares an anecdote about school. That’s an excellent time to pay attention. That’s the reward. Stop texting and listen. Unless you don’t want her to tell you anything ever again.

Parental interventions that make children happy clearly can and should be used to shape behaviour. The same goes for husbands, wives, co-workers and parents. Skinner, however, was a realist. He noted that use of reward was very difficult: the observer had to attend patiently until the target spontaneously manifested the desired behaviour, and then reinforce. This required a lot of time, and a lot of waiting, and that’s a problem. He also had to starve his animals down to three-quarters of their normal body weight before they would become interested enough in food reward to truly pay attention. But these are not the only shortcomings of the purely positive approach.

Negative emotions, like their positive counterparts, help us learn. We need to learn, because we’re stupid and easily damaged. We can die. That’s not good, and we don’t feel good about it. If we did, we would seek death, and then we would die. We don’t even feel good about dying if it only *might* happen. And that’s all the time. In that manner, negative emotions, for all their unpleasantness, protect us. We feel hurt and scared and ashamed and disgusted so we can avoid damage. And we’re susceptible to feeling such things a lot. In fact, we feel more negative about a loss of a given size than we feel good about the same-sized gain. Pain is more potent than pleasure, and anxiety more than hope.

Emotions, positive and negative, come in two usefully differentiated variants. Satisfaction (technically, satiation) tells us that what we did was good, while hope (technically, incentive reward) indicates that something pleasurable is on the way. Pain hurts us, so we won't repeat actions that produced personal damage or social isolation (as loneliness is also, technically, a form of pain). Anxiety makes us stay away from hurtful people and bad places so we don't have to feel pain. All these emotions must be balanced against each other, and carefully judged in context, but they're all required to keep us alive and thriving. We therefore do our children a disservice by failing to use whatever is available to help them learn, including negative emotions, even though such use should occur in the most merciful possible manner.

Skinner knew that threats and punishments could stop unwanted behaviours, just as reward reinforces what is desirable. In a world paralyzed at the thought of interfering with the hypothetically pristine path of natural child development, it can be difficult even to discuss the former techniques. However, children would not have such a lengthy period of natural development, prior to maturity, if their behaviour did not have to be shaped. They would just leap out of the womb, ready to trade stocks. Children also cannot be fully sheltered from fear and pain. They are small and vulnerable. They don't know much about the world. Even when they are doing something as natural as learning to walk, they're constantly being walloped by the world. And this is to say nothing of the frustration and rejection they inevitably experience when dealing with siblings and peers and uncooperative, stubborn adults. Given this, the fundamental moral question is not how to shelter children completely from misadventure and failure, so they never experience any fear or pain, but how to maximize their learning so that useful knowledge may be gained with minimal cost.

In the Disney movie *Sleeping Beauty*, the King and Queen have a daughter, the princess Aurora, after a long wait. They plan a great christening, to introduce her to the world. They welcome everyone who loves and honours their new daughter. But they fail to invite Maleficent (malicious, malevolent), who is essentially Queen of the Underworld, or Nature in her negative guise. This means, symbolically, that the two monarchs are overprotecting their beloved daughter, by setting up a world around her that has nothing negative in it. But this does not protect her. It makes her weak.

Maleficent curses the princess, sentencing her to death at the age of sixteen, caused by the prick of a spinning wheel’s needle. The spinning wheel is the wheel of fate; the prick, which produces blood, symbolizes the loss of virginity, a sign of the emergence of the woman from the child.

Fortunately, a good fairy (the positive element of Nature) reduces the punishment to unconsciousness, redeemable with love’s first kiss. The panicked King and Queen get rid of all the spinning wheels in the land, and turn their daughter over to the much-too-nice good fairies, of whom there are three. They continue with their strategy of removing all dangerous things—but in doing so they leave their daughter naïve, immature and weak. One day, just before Aurora’s sixteenth birthday, she meets a prince in the forest, and falls in love, the same day. By any reasonable standard, that’s a bit much. Then she loudly bemoans the fact that she is to be wed to Prince Philip, to whom she was betrothed as a child, and collapses emotionally when she is brought back to her parents’ castle for her birthday. It is at that moment that Maleficent’s curse manifests itself. A portal opens up in the castle, a spinning wheel appears, and Aurora pricks her finger and falls unconscious. She becomes Sleeping Beauty. In doing so (again, symbolically speaking) she chooses unconsciousness over the terror of adult life. Something existentially similar to this often occurs very frequently with overprotected children, who can be brought low—and then desire the bliss of unconsciousness—by their first real contact with failure or, worse, genuine malevolence, which they do not or will not understand and against which they have no defence.

Take the case of the three-year-old who has not learned to share. She displays her selfish behaviour in the presence of her parents, but they’re too nice to intervene. More truthfully, they refuse to pay attention, admit to what is happening, and teach her how to act properly. They’re annoyed, of course, when she won’t share with her sister, but they pretend everything is OK. It’s not OK. They’ll snap at her later, for something totally unrelated. She will be hurt by that, and confused, but learn nothing. Worse: when she tries to make friends, it won’t go well, because of her lack of social sophistication. Children her own age will be put off by her inability to cooperate. They’ll fight with her, or wander off and find someone else to play with. The parents of those children will observe her awkwardness and misbehaviour, and won’t invite her back to play with their kids. She will be lonely and rejected. That

will produce anxiety, depression and resentment. That will produce the turning from life that is equivalent to the wish for unconsciousness.

Parents who refuse to adopt the responsibility for disciplining their children think they can just opt out of the conflict necessary for proper child-rearing. They avoid being the bad guy (in the short term). But they do not at all rescue or protect their children from fear and pain. Quite the contrary: the judgmental and uncaring broader social world will mete out conflict and punishment far greater than that which would have been delivered by an awake parent. You can discipline your children, or you can turn that responsibility over to the harsh, uncaring judgmental world—and the motivation for the latter decision should never be confused with love.

You might object, as modern parents sometimes do: why should a child even *be* subject to the arbitrary dictates of a parent? In fact, there is a new variant of politically correct thinking that presumes that such an idea is "adultism:"[103] a form of prejudice and oppression analogous to, say, sexism or racism. The question of adult authority must be answered with care. That requires a thorough examination of the question itself. Accepting an objection as formulated is halfway to accepting its validity, and that can be dangerous if the question is ill-posed. Let's break it down.

First, why should a child be *subject*? That's easy. Every child must listen to and obey adults because he or she is dependent on the care that one or more imperfect grown-ups is willing to bestow. Given this, it is better for the child to act in a manner that invites genuine affection and goodwill. Something even better might be imagined. The child could act in a manner that simultaneously ensures optimal adult attention, in a manner that benefits his or her present state of being and future development. That's a very high standard, but it's in the best interests of the child, so there is every reason to aspire to it.

Every child should also be taught to comply gracefully with the expectations of civil society. This does not mean crushed into mindless ideological conformity. It means instead that parents must reward those attitudes and actions that will bring their child success in the world outside the family, and use threat and punishment when necessary to eliminate behaviours that will lead to misery and failure. There's a tight window of opportunity for this, as well, so getting it right quickly matters. If a child has

not been taught to behave properly by the age of four, it will forever be difficult for him or her to make friends. The research literature is quite clear on this. This matters, because peers are the primary source of socialization after the age of four. Rejected children cease to develop, because they are alienated from their peers. They fall further and further behind, as the other children continue to progress. Thus, the friendless child too often becomes the lonely, antisocial or depressed teenager and adult. This is not good. Much more of our sanity than we commonly realize is a consequence of our fortunate immersion in a social community. We must be continually reminded to think and act properly. When we drift, people that care for and love us nudge us in small ways and large back on track. So, we better have some of those people around.

It’s also not the case (back to the question) that adult dictates are all arbitrary. That’s only true in a dysfunctional totalitarian state. But in civilized, open societies, the majority abide by a functional social contract, aimed at mutual betterment—or at least at existence in close proximity without too much violence. Even a system of rules that allows for only that minimum contract is by no means arbitrary, given the alternatives. If a society does not adequately reward productive, pro-social behavior, insists upon distributing resources in a markedly arbitrary and unfair manner, and allows for theft and exploitation, it will not remain conflict-free for long. If its hierarchies are based only (or even primarily) on power, instead of the competence necessary to get important and difficult things done, it will be prone to collapse, as well. This is even true, in simpler form, of the hierarchies of chimpanzees, which is an indication of its fundamental, biological and non-arbitrary emergent truth.[104]

Poorly socialized children have terrible lives. Thus, it is better to socialize them optimally. Some of this can be done with reward, but not all of it. The issue is therefore not whether to use punishment and threat. The issue is whether to do it consciously and thoughtfully. How, then, should children be disciplined? This is a very difficult question, because children (and parents) differ vastly in their temperaments. Some children are agreeable. They deeply want to please, but pay for that with a tendency to be conflict-averse and dependent. Others are tougher-minded and more independent. Those kids want to do what they want, when they want, all the time. They can be

challenging, non-compliant and stubborn. Some children are desperate for rules and structure, and are content even in rigid environments. Others, with little regard for predictability and routine, are immune to demands for even minimal necessary order. Some are wildly imaginative and creative, and others more concrete and conservative. These are all deep, important differences, heavily influenced by biological factors and difficult to modify socially. It is fortunate indeed that in the face of such variability we are the beneficiaries of much thoughtful meditation on the proper use of social control.

Minimum Necessary Force

Here's a straightforward initial idea: rules should not be multiplied beyond necessity. Alternatively stated, bad laws drive out respect for good laws. This is the ethical—even legal—equivalent of Occam's razor, the scientist's conceptual guillotine, which states that the simplest possible hypothesis is preferable. So, don't encumber children—or their disciplinarians—with too many rules. That path leads to frustration.

Limit the rules. Then, figure out what to do when one of them gets broken. A general, context-independent rule for punishment severity is hard to establish. However, a helpful norm has already been enshrined in English common law, one of the great products of Western civilization. Its analysis can help us establish a second useful principle.

English common law allows you to defend your rights, but only in a reasonable manner. Someone breaks into your house. You have a loaded pistol. You have a right to defend yourself, but it's better to do it in stages. What if it's a drunk and confused neighbour? "Shoot 'em!" you think. But it's not that simple. So, you say, instead, "Stop! I have a gun." If that produces neither explanation nor retreat, you might consider a warning shot. Then, if the perpetrator still advances, you might take aim at his leg. (Don't mistake any of this for legal advice. It's an example.) A single brilliantly practical principle can be used to generate all these incrementally more severe reactions: that of minimum necessary force. So now we have two general principles of discipline. The first: limit the rules. The second: Use the least force necessary to enforce those rules.

About the first principle, you might ask, “Limit the rules to what, exactly?” Here are some suggestions. Do not bite, kick or hit, except in self-defence. Do not torture and bully other children, so you don’t end up in jail. Eat in a civilized and thankful manner, so that people are happy to have you at their house, and pleased to feed you. Learn to share, so other kids will play with you. Pay attention when spoken to by adults, so they don’t hate you and might therefore deign to teach you something. Go to sleep properly, and peaceably, so that your parents can have a private life and not resent your existence. Take care of your belongings, because you need to learn how and because you’re lucky to have them. Be good company when something fun is happening, so that you’re invited for the fun. Act so that other people are happy you’re around, so that people will want you around. A child who knows these rules will be welcome everywhere.

About the second, equally important principle, your question might be: What is minimum necessary force? This must be established experimentally, starting with the smallest possible intervention. Some children will be turned to stone by a glare. A verbal command will stop another. A thumb-cocked flick of the index finger on a small hand might be necessary for some. Such a strategy is particularly useful in public places such as restaurants. It can be administered suddenly, quietly and effectively, without risking escalation. What’s the alternative? A child who is crying angrily, demanding attention, is not making himself popular. A child who is running from table to table and disrupting everyone’s peace is bringing disgrace (an old word, but a good one) on himself and his parents. Such outcomes are far from optimal, and children will definitely misbehave more in public, because they are experimenting: trying to establish if the same old rules also apply in the new place. They don’t sort that out verbally, not when they are under three.

When our children were little and we took them to restaurants, they attracted smiles. They sat nicely and ate politely. They couldn’t keep it up for long, but we didn’t keep them there too long. When they started to get antsy, after sitting for forty-five minutes, we knew it was time to go. That was part of the deal. Nearby diners would tell us how nice it was to see a happy family. We weren’t always happy, and our children weren’t always properly behaved. But they were most of the time, and it was wonderful to see people responding so positively to their presence. It was truly good for the kids.

They could see that people liked them. This also reinforced their good behaviour. That was the reward.

People will really like your kids if you give them the chance. This is something I learned as soon as we had our first baby, our daughter, Mikhaila. When we took her down the street in her little foldup stroller in our French Montreal working-class neighbourhood, rough-looking heavy-drinking lumberjack types would stop in their tracks and smile at her. They would coo and giggle and make stupid faces. Watching people respond to children restores your faith in human nature. All that's multiplied when your kids behave in public. To ensure that such things happen, you have to discipline your children carefully and effectively—and to do that, you have to know something about reward, and about punishment, instead of shying away from the knowledge.

Part of establishing a relationship with your son or daughter is learning how that small person responds to disciplinary intervention—and then intervening effectively. It's very easy to mouth clichés instead, such as: "There is no excuse for physical punishment," or, "Hitting children merely teaches them to hit." Let's start with the former claim: *there is no excuse for physical punishment*. First, we should note the widespread consensus around the idea that some forms of misbehavior, particularly those associated with theft and assault, are both wrong and should be subject to sanction. Second, we should note that almost all those sanctions involve punishment in its many psychological and more directly physical forms. Deprivation of liberty causes pain in a manner essentially similar to that of physical trauma. The same can be said of the use of social isolation (including time out). We know this neurobiologically. The same brain areas mediate response to all three, and all are ameliorated by the same class of drugs, opiates.[105] Jail is clearly physical punishment—particularly solitary confinement—even when nothing violent happens. Third, we should note that some misbegotten actions must be brought to a halt both effectively and immediately, not least so that something worse doesn't happen. What's the proper punishment for someone who will not stop poking a fork into an electrical socket? Or who runs away laughing in a crowded supermarket parking lot? The answer is simple: whatever will stop it fastest, within reason. Because the alternative could be fatal.

That's pretty obvious, in the case of parking lot or outlet. But the same thing applies in the social realm, and that brings us to the fourth point regarding excuses for physical punishment. The penalties for misbehavior (of the sort that could have been effectively halted in childhood) become increasingly severe as children get older—and it is disproportionately those who remain unsocialized effectively by age four who end up punished explicitly by society in their later youth and early adulthood. Those unconstrained four-year-olds, in turn, are often those who were unduly aggressive, by nature, at age two. They were statistically more likely than their peers to kick, hit, bite and take away toys (later known as stealing). They comprise about five per cent of boys, and a much smaller percentage of girls.[106] To unthinkingly parrot the magic line "There is no excuse for physical punishment" is also to foster the delusion that teenage devils magically emerge from once-innocent little child-angels. You're not doing your child any favors by overlooking any misbehavior (particularly if he or she is temperamentally more aggressive).

To hold the *no excuse for physical punishment* theory is also (fifth) to assume that the word *no* can be effectively uttered to another person in the absence of the threat of punishment. A woman can say *no* to a powerful, narcissistic man only because she has social norms, the law and the state backing her up. A parent can only say *no* to a child who wants a third piece of cake because he or she is larger, stronger and more capable than the child (and is additionally backed up in his authority by law and state). What *no* means, in the final analysis, is always "If you continue to do that, something you do not like will happen to you." Otherwise it means nothing. Or, worse, it means "another nonsensical nothing muttered by ignorable adults." Or, worse still, it means, "all adults are ineffectual and weak." This is a particularly bad lesson, when every child's destiny is to become an adult, and when most things that are learned without undue personal pain are modelled or explicitly taught by adults). What does a child who ignores adults and holds them in contempt have to look forward to? Why grow up at all? And that's the story of Peter Pan, who thinks all adults are variants of Captain Hook, tyrannical and terrified of his own mortality (think hungry crocodile with clock in his stomach). The only time *no* ever means *no* in the absence of violence is when it is uttered by one civilized person to another.

And what about the idea that *hitting a child merely teaches them to hit*? First: *No*. *Wrong*. Too simple. For starters, "hitting" is a very unsophisticated word to describe the disciplinary act of an effective parent. If "hitting" accurately described the entire range of physical force, then there would be no difference between rain droplets and atom bombs. Magnitude matters—and so does context, if we're not being wilfully blind and naïve about the issue. Every child knows the difference between being bitten by a mean, unprovoked dog and being nipped by his own pet when he tries playfully but too carelessly to take its bone. How hard someone is hit, and why they are hit, cannot merely be ignored when speaking of hitting. Timing, part of context, is also of crucial importance. If you flick your two-year-old with your finger just after he smacks the baby on the head with a wooden block, he will get the connection, and be at least somewhat less willing to smack her again in the future. That seems like a good outcome. He certainly won't conclude that he should hit her more, using the flick of his mother's finger as an example. He's not stupid. He's just jealous, impulsive and not very sophisticated. And how else are you going to protect his younger sibling? If you discipline ineffectively, then the baby will suffer. Maybe for years. The bullying will continue, because you won't do a damn thing to stop it. You'll avoid the conflict that's necessary to establish peace. You'll turn a blind eye. And then later, when the younger child confronts you (maybe even in adulthood), you'll say, "I never knew it was like that." You just didn't want to know. So, you didn't. You just rejected the responsibility of discipline, and justified it with a continual show of your niceness. Every gingerbread house has a witch inside it that devours children.

So where does all that leave us? With the decision to discipline effectively, or to discipline ineffectively (but never the decision to forego discipline altogether, because nature and society will punish in a draconian manner whatever errors of childhood behavior remain uncorrected). So here are a few practical hints: time out can be an extremely effective form of punishment, particularly if the misbehaving child is welcome as soon as he controls his temper. An angry child should sit by himself until he calms down. Then he should be allowed to return to normal life. That means the child wins—instead of his anger. The rule is "Come be with us as soon as you can behave properly." This is a very good deal for child, parent and society. You'll be able to tell if your child has really regained control. You'll like him again,

despite his earlier misbehaviour. If you're still mad, maybe he hasn't completely repented—or maybe you should do something about your tendency to hold a grudge.

If your child is the kind of determined varmint who simply runs away, laughing, when placed on the steps or in his room, physical restraint might have to be added to the time out routine. A child can be held carefully but firmly by the upper arms, until he or she stops squirming and pays attention. If that fails, being turned over a parent's knee might be required. For the child who is pushing the limits in a spectacularly inspired way, a swat across the backside can indicate requisite seriousness on the part of a responsible adult. There are some situations in which even that will not suffice, partly because some children are very determined, exploratory, and tough, or because the offending behaviour is truly severe. And if you're not thinking such things through, then you're not acting responsibly as a parent. You're leaving the dirty work to someone else, who will be much dirtier doing it.

A Summary of Principles

Disciplinary principle 1: *limit the rules*. Principle 2: *use minimum necessary force*. Here's a third: *parents should come in pairs*.[107] Raising young children is demanding and exhausting. Because of this, it's easy for a parent to make a mistake. Insomnia, hunger, the aftermath of an argument, a hangover, a bad day at work—any of these things singly can make a person unreasonable, while in combination they can produce someone dangerous. Under such circumstances, it is necessary to have someone else around, to observe, and step in, and discuss. This will make it less likely that a whiny provocative child and her fed-up cranky parent will excite each other to the point of no return. Parents should come in pairs so the father of a newborn can watch the new mother so she won't get worn out and do something desperate after hearing her colicky baby wail from eleven in the evening until five in the morning for thirty nights in a row. I am not saying we should be mean to single mothers, many of whom struggle impossibly and courageously—and a proportion of whom have had to escape, singly, from a brutal relationship—but that doesn't mean we should pretend that all family forms are equally viable. They're not. Period.

Here's a fourth principle, one that is more particularly psychological*: parents should understand their own capacity to be harsh, vengeful, arrogant, resentful, angry and deceitful*. Very few people set out, consciously, to do a terrible job as father or mother, but bad parenting happens all the time. This is because people have a great capacity for evil, as well as good—and because they remain willfully blind to that fact. People are aggressive and selfish, as well as kind and thoughtful. For this reason, no adult human being—no hierarchical, predatory ape—can truly tolerate being dominated by an upstart child. Revenge will come. Ten minutes after a pair of all-too-nice-and-patient parents have failed to prevent a public tantrum at the local supermarket, they will pay their toddler back with the cold shoulder when he runs up, excited, to show mom and dad his newest accomplishment. Enough embarrassment, disobedience, and dominance challenge, and even the most hypothetically selfless parent will become resentful. And then the real punishment will begin. Resentment breeds the desire for vengeance. Fewer spontaneous offers of love will be offered, with more rationalizations for their absence. Fewer opportunities for the personal development of the child will be sought out. A subtle turning away will begin. And this is only the beginning of the road to total familial warfare, conducted mostly in the underworld, underneath the false façade of normality and love.

This frequently-travelled path is much better avoided. A parent who is seriously aware of his or her limited tolerance and capacity for misbehaviour when provoked can therefore seriously plan a proper disciplinary strategy—particularly if monitored by an equally awake partner—and never let things degenerate to the point where genuine hatred emerges. Beware. There are toxic families everywhere. They make no rules and limit no misbehaviour. The parents lash out randomly and unpredictably. The children live in that chaos and are crushed, if they're timid, or rebel, counterproductively, if they're tough. It's not good. It can get murderous.

Here's a fifth and final and most general principle. Parents have a duty to act as proxies for the real world—merciful proxies, caring proxies—but proxies, nonetheless. This obligation supersedes any responsibility to ensure happiness, foster creativity, or boost self-esteem. It is the primary duty of parents to make their children socially desirable. That will provide the child with opportunity, self-regard, and security. It's more important even than

fostering individual identity. That Holy Grail can only be pursued, in any case, after a high degree of social sophistication has been established.

The Good Child—and the Responsible Parent

A properly socialized three-year-old is polite and engaging. She's also no pushover. She evokes interest from other children and appreciation from adults. She exists in a world where other kids welcome her and compete for her attention, and where adults are happy to see her, instead of hiding behind false smiles. She will be introduced to the world by people who are pleased to do so. This will do more for her eventual individuality than any cowardly parental attempt to avoid day-to-day conflict and discipline.

Discuss your likes and dislikes with regards to your children with your partner or, failing that, a friend. But do not be afraid to have likes and dislikes. You can judge suitable from unsuitable, and wheat from chaff. You realize the difference between good and evil. Having clarified your stance—having assessed yourself for pettiness, arrogance and resentment—you take the next step, and you make your children behave. You take responsibility for their discipline. You take responsibility for the mistakes you will inevitably make while disciplining. You can apologize, when you're wrong, and learn to do better.

You love your kids, after all. If their actions make you dislike them, think what an effect they will have on other people, who care much less about them than you. Those other people will punish them, severely, by omission or commission. Don't allow that to happen. Better to let your little monsters know what is desirable and what is not, so they become sophisticated denizens of the world outside the family.

A child who pays attention, instead of drifting, and can play, and does not whine, and is comical, but not annoying, and is trustworthy—that child will have friends wherever he goes. His teachers will like him, and so will his parents. If he attends politely to adults, he will be attended to, smiled at and happily instructed. He will thrive, in what can so easily be a cold, unforgiving and hostile world. Clear rules make for secure children and calm, rational parents. Clear principles of discipline and punishment balance mercy and justice so that social development and psychological maturity can be optimally promoted. Clear rules and proper discipline help the child, and the

family, and society, establish, maintain and expand the order that is all that protects us from chaos and the terrors of the underworld, where everything is uncertain, anxiety-provoking, hopeless and depressing. There are no greater gifts that a committed and courageous parent can bestow.

Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.

31614

RULE 6

SET YOUR HOUSE IN PERFECT ORDER BEFORE YOU CRITICIZE THE WORLD

A RELIGIOUS PROBLEM

It does not seem reasonable to describe the young man who shot twenty children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012 as a religious person. This is equally true for the Colorado theatre gunman and the Columbine High School killers. But these murderous individuals had a problem with reality that existed at a religious depth. As one of the members of the Columbine duo wrote:[108]

> The human race isn't worth fighting for, only worth killing. Give the Earth back to the animals. They deserve it infinitely more than we do. Nothing means anything anymore.

People who think such things view Being itself as inequitable and harsh to the point of corruption, and *human* Being, in particular, as contemptible. They appoint themselves supreme adjudicators of reality and find it wanting. They are the ultimate critics. The deeply cynical writer continues:

> If you recall your history, the Nazis came up with a "final solution" to the Jewish problem. … Kill them all. Well, in case you haven't figured it out, I say "KILL MANKIND." No one should survive.

For such individuals, the world of experience is insufficient and evil—so to hell with everything!

What is happening when someone comes to think in this manner? A great German play, *Faust: A Tragedy*, written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, addresses that issue. The play's main character, a scholar named Heinrich Faust, trades his immortal soul to the devil, Mephistopheles. In return, he receives whatever he desires while still alive on Earth. In Goethe's play, Mephistopheles is the eternal adversary of Being. He has a central, defining credo:[109]

> *I am the spirit who negates*

and rightly so, for all that comes to be
deserves to perish, wretchedly.
It were better nothing would begin!
Thus everything that your terms sin,
destruction, evil represent—
that is my proper element.

Goethe considered this hateful sentiment so important—so key to the central element of vengeful human destructiveness—that he had Mephistopheles say it a second time, phrased somewhat differently, in Part II of the play, written many years later.[110]

People think often in the Mephistophelean manner, although they seldom act upon their thoughts as brutally as the mass murderers of school, college and theatre. Whenever we experience injustice, real or imagined; whenever we encounter tragedy or fall prey to the machinations of others; whenever we experience the horror and pain of our own apparently arbitrary limitations—the temptation to question Being and then to curse it rises foully from the darkness. Why must innocent people suffer so terribly? What kind of bloody, horrible planet is this, anyway?

Life is in truth very hard. Everyone is destined for pain and slated for destruction. Sometimes suffering is clearly the result of a personal fault such as willful blindness, poor decision-making or malevolence. In such cases, when it appears to be self-inflicted, it may even seem just. People get what they deserve, you might contend. That's cold comfort, however, even when true. Sometimes, if those who are suffering changed their behaviour, then their lives would unfold less tragically. But human control is limited. Susceptibility to despair, disease, aging and death is universal. In the final analysis, we do not appear to be the architects of our own fragility. Whose fault is it, then?

People who are very ill (or, worse, who have a sick child) will inevitably find themselves asking this question, whether they are religious believers or not. The same is true of someone who finds his shirtsleeve caught in the gears of a giant bureaucracy—who is suffering through a tax audit, or fighting an interminable lawsuit or divorce. And it's not only the obviously suffering who are tormented by the need to blame someone or something for the intolerable state of their Being. At the height of his fame, influence and

creative power, for example, the towering Leo Tolstoy himself began to question the value of human existence.[111] He reasoned in this way:

> My position was terrible. I knew that I could find nothing in the way of rational knowledge except a denial of life; and in faith I could find nothing except a denial of reason, and this was even more impossible than a denial of life. According to rational knowledge, it followed that life is evil, and people know it. They do not have to live, yet they have lived and they do live, just as I myself had lived, even though I had known for a long time that life is meaningless and evil.

Try as he might, Tolstoy could identify only four means of escaping from such thoughts. One was retreating into childlike ignorance of the problem. Another was pursuing mindless pleasure. The third was "continuing to drag out a life that is evil and meaningless, knowing beforehand that nothing can come of it." He identified that particular form of escape with weakness: "The people in this category know that death is better than life, but they do not have the strength to act rationally and quickly put an end to the delusion by killing themselves.…"

Only the fourth and final mode of escape involved "strength and energy. It consists of destroying life, once one has realized that life is evil and meaningless." Tolstoy relentlessly followed his thoughts:

> Only unusually strong and logically consistent people act in this manner. Having realized all the stupidity of the joke that is being played on us and seeing that the blessings of the dead are greater than those of the living and that it is better not to exist, they act and put an end to this stupid joke; and they use any means of doing it: a rope around the neck, water, a knife in the heart, a train.

Tolstoy wasn't pessimistic enough. The stupidity of the joke being played on us does not merely motivate suicide. It motivates murder—mass murder, often followed by suicide. That is a far more effective existential protest. By June of 2016, unbelievable as it may seem, there had been one thousand mass killings (defined as four or more people shot in a single incident, excluding the shooter) in the US in twelve hundred and sixty days.[112] That's one such event on five of every six days for more than three years. Everyone says, "We don't understand." How can we still pretend that? Tolstoy understood, more than a century ago. The ancient authors of the biblical story of Cain and Abel understood, as well, more than twenty centuries ago. They described murder as the first act of post-Edenic history: and not just murder, but fratricidal murder—murder not only of someone innocent but of someone

ideal and good, and murder done consciously to spite the creator of the universe. Today's killers tell us the same thing, in their own words. Who would dare say that this is not the worm at the core of the apple? But we will not listen, because the truth cuts too close to the bone. Even for a mind as profound as that of the celebrated Russian author, there was no way out. How can the rest of us manage, when a man of Tolstoy's stature admits defeat? For years, he hid his guns from himself and would not walk with a rope in hand, in case he hanged himself.

How can a person who is awake avoid outrage at the world?

Vengeance or Transformation

A religious man might shake his fist in desperation at the apparent injustice and blindness of God. Even Christ Himself felt abandoned before the cross, or so the story goes. A more agnostic or atheistic individual might blame fate, or meditate bitterly on the brutality of chance. Another might tear himself apart, searching for the character flaws underlying his suffering and deterioration. These are all variations on a theme. The name of the target changes, but the underlying psychology remains constant. Why? Why is there so much suffering and cruelty?

Well, perhaps it really is God's doing—or the fault of blind, pointless fate, if you are inclined to think that way. And there appears to be every reason to think that way. But, what happens if you do? Mass murderers believe that the suffering attendant upon existence justifies judgment and revenge, as the Columbine boys so clearly indicated:[113]

> I will sooner die than betray my own thoughts. Before I leave this worthless place, I will kill who ever I deem unfit for anything, especially life. If you pissed me off in the past, you will die if I see you. You might be able to piss off others, and have it eventually all blow over, but not me. I don't forget people who wronged me.

One of the most vengeful murderers of the twentieth century, the terrible Carl Panzram, was raped, brutalized and betrayed in the Minnesota institution responsible for his "rehabilitation" when he was a delinquent juvenile. He emerged, enraged beyond measure, as burglar, arsonist, rapist and serial killer. He aimed consciously and consistently at destruction, even keeping track of the dollar value of the property he burned. He started by hating the individuals who had hurt him. His resentment grew, until his hatred

encompassed all of mankind, and he didn't stop there. His destructiveness was aimed in some fundamental manner at God Himself. There is no other way of phrasing it. Panzram raped, murdered and burned to express his outrage at Being. He acted as if Someone was responsible. The same thing happens in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain's sacrifices are rejected. He exists in suffering. He calls out God and challenges the Being He created. God refuses his plea. He tells Cain that his trouble is self-induced. Cain, in his rage, kills Abel, God's favourite (and, truth be known, Cain's idol). Cain is jealous, of course, of his successful brother. But he destroys Abel primarily to spite God. This is the truest version of what happens when people take their vengeance to the ultimate extreme.

Panzram's response was (and this is what was so terrible) perfectly understandable. The details of his autobiography reveal that he was one of Tolstoy's strong and logically consistent people. He was a powerful, consistent, fearless actor. He had the courage of his convictions. How could someone like him be expected to forgive and forget, given what had happened to him? Truly terrible things happen to people. It's no wonder they're out for revenge. Under such conditions, vengeance seems a moral necessity. How can it be distinguished from the demand for justice? After the experience of terrible atrocity, isn't forgiveness just cowardice, or lack of willpower? Such questions torment me. But people emerge from terrible pasts to do good, and not evil, although such an accomplishment can seem superhuman.

I have met people who managed to do it. I know a man, a great artist, who emerged from just such a "school" as the one described by Panzram—only this man was thrown into it as an innocent five-year-old, fresh from a long stretch in a hospital, where he had suffered measles, mumps and chicken pox, simultaneously. Incapable of speaking the language of the school, deliberately isolated from his family, abused, starved and otherwise tormented, he emerged an angry, broken young man. He hurt himself badly in the aftermath with drugs and alcohol and other forms of self-destructive behaviour. He detested everyone—God, himself and blind fate included. But he put an end to all of that. He stopped drinking. He stopped hating (although it still emerges in flashes). He revitalized the artistic culture of his Native tradition, and trained young men to continue in his footsteps. He produced a fifty-foot totem pole memorializing the events of his life, and a canoe, forty

feet long, from a single log, of a kind rarely if ever produced now. He brought his family together, and held a great potlatch, with sixteen hours of dancing and hundreds of people in attendance, to express his grief, and make peace with the past. He decided to be a good person, and then did the impossible things required to live that way.

I had a client who did not have good parents. Her mother died when she was very young. Her grandmother, who raised her, was a harridan, bitter and over-concerned with appearances. She mistreated her granddaughter, punishing her for her virtues: creativity, sensitivity, intelligence—unable to resist acting out her resentment for an admittedly hard life on her granddaughter. She had a better relationship with her father, but he was an addict who died, badly, while she cared for him. My client had a son. She perpetuated none of this with him. He grew up truthful, and independent, and hard-working, and smart. Instead of widening the tear in the cultural fabric she inherited, and transmitting it, she sewed it up. She rejected the sins of her forefathers. Such things can be done.

> Distress, whether psychic, physical, or intellectual, need not at all produce nihilism (that is, the radical rejection of value, meaning and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations.

Nietzsche wrote those words.[114] What he meant was this: people who experience evil may certainly desire to perpetuate it, to pay it forward. But it is also possible to learn good by experiencing evil. A bullied boy can mimic his tormentors. But he can also learn from his own abuse that it is wrong to push people around and make their lives miserable. Someone tormented by her mother can learn from her terrible experiences how important it is to be a good parent. Many, perhaps even most, of the adults who abuse children were abused themselves as children. However, the majority of people who were abused as children do not abuse their own children. This is a well-established fact, which can be demonstrated, simply, arithmetically, in this way: if one parent abused three children, and each of those children had three children, and so on, then there would be three abusers the first generation, nine the second, twenty-seven the third, eighty-one the fourth—and so on exponentially. After twenty generations, more than ten billion would have suffered childhood abuse: more people than currently inhabit the planet. But instead, abuse disappears across generations. People constrain its spread.

That’s a testament to the genuine dominance of good over evil in the human heart.

The desire for vengeance, however justified, also bars the way to other productive thoughts. The American/English poet T. S. Eliot explained why, in his play, *The Cocktail Party*. One of his characters is not having a good time of it. She speaks of her profound unhappiness to a psychiatrist. She says she hopes that all her suffering is her own fault. The psychiatrist is taken aback. He asks why. She has thought long and hard about this, she says, and has come to the following conclusion: if it’s her fault, she might be able to do something about it. If it’s God’s fault, however—if reality itself is flawed, hell-bent on ensuring her misery—then she is doomed. She couldn’t change the structure of reality itself. But maybe she could change her own life.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had every reason to question the structure of existence when he was imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp, in the middle of the terrible twentieth century. He had served as a soldier on the ill-prepared Russian front lines in the face of a Nazi invasion. He had been arrested, beaten and thrown into prison by his own people. Then he was struck by cancer. He could have become resentful and bitter. His life had been rendered miserable by both Stalin and Hitler, two of the worst tyrants in history. He lived in brutal conditions. Vast stretches of his precious time were stolen from him and squandered. He witnessed the pointless and degrading suffering and death of his friends and acquaintances. Then he contracted an extremely serious disease. Solzhenitsyn had cause to curse God. Job himself barely had it as hard.

But the great writer, the profound, spirited defender of truth, did not allow his mind to turn towards vengeance and destruction. He opened his eyes, instead. During his many trials, Solzhenitsyn encountered people who comported themselves nobly, under horrific circumstances. He contemplated their behaviour deeply. Then he asked himself the most difficult of questions: had he personally contributed to the catastrophe of his life? If so, how? He remembered his unquestioning support of the Communist Party in his early years. He reconsidered his whole life. He had plenty of time in the camps. How had he missed the mark, in the past? How many times had he acted against his own conscience, engaging in actions that he knew to be wrong? How many times had he betrayed himself, and lied? Was there any way that

the sins of his past could be rectified, atoned for, in the muddy hell of a Soviet gulag?

Solzhenitsyn pored over the details of his life, with a fine-toothed comb. He asked himself a second question, and a third. Can I stop making such mistakes, now? Can I repair the damage done by my past failures, now? He learned to watch and to listen. He found people he admired; who were honest, despite everything. He took himself apart, piece by piece, let what was unnecessary and harmful die, and resurrected himself. Then he wrote *The Gulag Archipelago*, a history of the Soviet prison camp system.[115] It's a forceful, terrible book, written with the overwhelming moral force of unvarnished truth. Its sheer outrage screamed unbearably across hundreds of pages. Banned (and for good reason) in the USSR, it was smuggled to the West in the 1970s, and burst upon the world. Solzhenitsyn's writing utterly and finally demolished the intellectual credibility of communism, as ideology or society. He took an axe to the trunk of the tree whose bitter fruits had nourished him so poorly—and whose planting he had witnessed and supported.

One man's decision to change his life, instead of cursing fate, shook the whole pathological system of communist tyranny to its core. It crumbled entirely, not so many years later, and Solzhenitsyn's courage was not the least of the reasons why. He was not the only such person to perform such a miracle. Václav Havel, the persecuted writer who later, impossibly, became the president of Czechoslovakia, then of the new Czech Republic, comes to mind, as does Mahatma Gandhi.

Things Fall Apart

Whole peoples have adamantly refused to judge reality, to criticize Being, to blame God. It's interesting to consider the Old Testament Hebrews in this regard. Their travails followed a consistent pattern. The stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and Noah and the Tower of Babel are truly ancient. Their origins vanish into the mysteries of time. It's not until after the flood story in Genesis that something like history, as we understand it, truly starts. It starts with Abraham. Abraham's descendants become the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible. They enter a

covenant with Yahweh—with God—and begin their recognizably historical adventures.

Under the leadership of a great man, the Hebrews organize themselves into a society, and then an empire. As their fortunes rise, success breeds pride and arrogance. Corruption raises its ugly head. The increasingly hubristic state becomes obsessed with power, begins to forget its duty to the widows and orphans, and deviates from its age-old agreement with God. A prophet arises. He brazenly and publicly reviles the authoritarian king and faithless country for their failures before God—an act of blind courage—telling them of the terrible judgment to come. When his wise words are not completely ignored, they are heeded too late. God smites his wayward people, dooming them to abject defeat in battle and generations of subjugation. The Hebrews repent, at length, blaming their misfortune on their own failure to adhere to God's word. They insist to themselves that they could have done better. They rebuild their state, and the cycle begins again.

This is life. We build structures to live in. We build families, and states, and countries. We abstract the principles upon which those structures are founded and formulate systems of belief. At first we inhabit those structures and beliefs like Adam and Eve in Paradise. But success makes us complacent. We forget to pay attention. We take what we have for granted. We turn a blind eye. We fail to notice that things are changing, or that corruption is taking root. And everything falls apart. Is that the fault of reality—of God? Or do things fall apart because we have not paid sufficient attention?

When the hurricane hit New Orleans, and the town sank under the waves, was that a natural disaster? The Dutch prepare their dikes for the worst storm in ten thousand years. Had New Orleans followed that example, no tragedy would have occurred. It's not that no one knew. The Flood Control Act of 1965 mandated improvements in the levee system that held back Lake Pontchartrain. The system was to be completed by 1978. Forty years later, only 60 percent of the work had been done. Willful blindness and corruption took the city down.

A hurricane is an act of God. But failure to prepare, when the necessity for preparation is well known—that's sin. That's failure to hit the mark. And the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The ancient Jews always blamed themselves when things fell apart. They acted as if God's goodness—the

goodness of reality—was axiomatic, and took responsibility for their own failure. That's insanely responsible. But the alternative is to judge reality as insufficient, to criticize Being itself, and to sink into resentment and the desire for revenge.

If you are suffering—well, that's the norm. People are limited and life is tragic. If your suffering is unbearable, however, and you are starting to become corrupted, here's something to think about.

Clean Up Your Life

Consider your circumstances. Start small. Have you taken full advantage of the opportunities offered to you? Are you working hard on your career, or even your job, or are you letting bitterness and resentment hold you back and drag you down? Have you made peace with your brother? Are you treating your spouse and your children with dignity and respect? Do you have habits that are destroying your health and well-being? Are you truly shouldering your responsibilities? Have you said what you need to say to your friends and family members? Are there things that you could do, that you know you could do, that would make things around you better?

Have you cleaned up your life?

If the answer is no, here's something to try: *Start to stop doing what you know to be wrong*. Start stopping today. Don't waste time questioning how you know that what you're doing is wrong, if you are certain that it is. Inopportune questioning can confuse, without enlightening, as well as deflecting you from action. You can know that something is wrong or right without knowing why. Your entire Being can tell you something that you can neither explain nor articulate. Every person is too complex to know themselves completely, and we all contain wisdom that we cannot comprehend.

So, simply stop, when you apprehend, however dimly, that you should stop. Stop acting in that particular, despicable manner. Stop saying those things that make you weak and ashamed. Say only those things that make you strong. Do only those things that you could speak of with honour.

You can use your own standards of judgment. You can rely on yourself for guidance. You don't have to adhere to some external, arbitrary code of behaviour (although you should not overlook the guidelines of your culture.

Life is short, and you don’t have time to figure everything out on your own. The wisdom of the past was hard-earned, and your dead ancestors may have something useful to tell you).

Don’t blame capitalism, the radical left, or the iniquity of your enemies. Don’t reorganize the state until you have ordered your own experience. Have some humility. If you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city? Let your own soul guide you. Watch what happens over the days and weeks. When you are at work you will begin to say what you really think. You will start to tell your wife, or your husband, or your children, or your parents, what you really want and need. When you know that you have left something undone, you will act to correct the omission. Your head will start to clear up, as you stop filling it with lies. Your experience will improve, as you stop distorting it with inauthentic actions. You will then begin to discover new, more subtle things that you are doing wrong. Stop doing those, too. After some months and years of diligent effort, your life will become simpler and less complicated. Your judgment will improve. You will untangle your past. You will become stronger and less bitter. You will move more confidently into the future. You will stop making your life unnecessarily difficult. You will then be left with the inevitable bare tragedies of life, but they will no longer be compounded with bitterness and deceit.

Perhaps you will discover that your now less-corrupted soul, much stronger than it might otherwise have been, is now able to bear those remaining, necessary, minimal, inescapable tragedies. Perhaps you will even learn to encounter them so that they stay tragic—merely tragic—instead of degenerating into outright hellishness. Maybe your anxiety, and hopelessness, and resentment, and anger—however murderous, initially—will recede. Perhaps your uncorrupted soul will then see its existence as a genuine good, as something to celebrate, even in the face of your own vulnerability. Perhaps you will become an ever-more-powerful force for peace and whatever is good.

Perhaps you will then see that if all people did this, in their own lives, the world might stop being an evil place. After that, with continued effort, perhaps it could even stop being a tragic place. Who knows what existence might be like if we all decided to strive for the best? Who knows what eternal heavens might be established by our spirits, purified by truth, aiming skyward, right here on the fallen Earth?

Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.

RULE 7

PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

GET WHILE THE GETTING'S GOOD

Life is suffering. That's clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth. It's basically what God tells Adam and Eve, immediately before he kicks them out of Paradise.

> Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.
>
> And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;
>
> Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;
>
> By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:16-19. KJV)

What in the world should be done about that?

The simplest, most obvious, and most direct answer? Pursue pleasure. Follow your impulses. Live for the moment. Do what's expedient. Lie, cheat, steal, deceive, manipulate—but don't get caught. In an ultimately meaningless universe, what possible difference could it make? And this is by no means a new idea. The fact of life's tragedy and the suffering that is part of it has been used to justify the pursuit of immediate selfish gratification for a very long time.

> Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a man comes to his end, and no one has been known to return from Hades.
>
> Because we were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; because the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts.
>
> When it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air. Our name will be forgotten in time and no one will remember our works; our life

> will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat.
> For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back.
> Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist, and make use of the creation to the full as in youth.
> Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no flower of spring pass by us.
> Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither.
> Let none of us fail to share in our revelry, everywhere let us leave signs of enjoyment, because this is our portion, and this our lot.
> Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow nor regard the gray hairs of the aged.
> But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless.
> (Wisdom 2:1-11, RSV).

The pleasure of expediency may be fleeting, but it's pleasure, nonetheless, and that's something to stack up against the terror and pain of existence. Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost, as the old proverb has it. Why not simply take everything you can get, whenever the opportunity arises? Why not determine to live in that manner?

Or is there an alternative, more powerful and more compelling?

Our ancestors worked out very sophisticated answers to such questions, but we still don't understand them very well. This is because they are in large part still implicit—manifest primarily in ritual and myth and, as of yet, incompletely articulated. We act them out and represent them in stories, but we're not yet wise enough to formulate them explicitly. We're still chimps in a troupe, or wolves in a pack. We know how to behave. We know who's who, and why. We've learned that through experience. Our knowledge has been shaped by our interaction with others. We've established predictable routines and patterns of behavior—but we don't really understand them, or know where they originated. They've evolved over great expanses of time. No one was formulating them explicitly (at least not in the dimmest reaches of the past), even though we've been telling each other how to act forever. One day, however, not so long ago, we woke up. We were already doing, but we started *noticing* what we were doing. We started using our bodies as devices to represent their own actions. We started imitating and dramatizing. We invented ritual. We started acting out our own experiences. Then we started to tell stories. We coded our observations of our own drama in these stories. In this manner, the information that was first only embedded in our

behaviour became represented in our stories. But we didn't and still don't understand what it all means.

The Biblical narrative of Paradise and the Fall is one such story, fabricated by our collective imagination, working over the centuries. It provides a profound account of the nature of Being, and points the way to a mode of conceptualization and action well-matched to that nature. In the Garden of Eden, prior to the dawn of self-consciousness—so goes the story—human beings were sinless. Our primordial parents, Adam and Eve, walked with God. Then, tempted by the snake, the first couple ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, discovered Death and vulnerability, and turned away from God. Mankind was exiled from Paradise, and began its effortful mortal existence. The idea of sacrifice enters soon afterward, beginning with the account of Cain and Abel, and developing through the Abrahamic adventures and the Exodus: After much contemplation, struggling humanity learns that God's favour could be gained, and his wrath averted, through proper sacrifice—and, also, that bloody murder might be motivated among those unwilling or unable to succeed in this manner.

The Delay of Gratification

When engaging in sacrifice, our forefathers began to act out what would be considered a proposition, if it were stated in words: *that something better might be attained in the future by giving up something of value in the present.* Recall, if you will, that the necessity for work is one of the curses placed by God upon Adam and his descendants in consequence of Original Sin. Adam's waking to the fundamental constraints of his Being—his vulnerability, his eventual death—is equivalent to his discovery of the future. The future: that's where you go to die (hopefully, not too soon). Your demise might be staved off through work; through the sacrifice of the *now* to gain benefit *later*. It is for this reason—among others, no doubt—that the concept of sacrifice is introduced in the Biblical chapter immediately following the drama of the Fall. There is little difference between sacrifice and work. They are also both uniquely human. Sometimes, animals act as if they are working, but they are really only following the dictates of their nature. Beavers build dams. They do so because they are beavers, and beavers build dams. They don't think,

“Yeah, but I’d rather be on a beach in Mexico with my girlfriend,” while they’re doing it.

Prosaically, such sacrifice—work—is delay of gratification, but that’s a very mundane phrase to describe something of such profound significance. The discovery that gratification could be delayed was simultaneously the discovery of time and, with it, causality (at least the causal force of voluntary human action). Long ago, in the dim mists of time, *we began to realize that reality was structured as if it could be bargained with.* We learned that behaving properly now, in the present—regulating our impulses, considering the plight of others—could bring rewards in the future, in a time and place that did not yet exist. We began to inhibit, control and organize our immediate impulses, so that we could stop interfering with other people and our future selves. Doing so was indistinguishable from organizing society: the discovery of the causal relationship between our efforts today and the quality of tomorrow motivated the social contract—the organization that enables today’s work to be stored, reliably (mostly in the form of promises from others).

Understanding is often acted out before it can be articulated (just as a child acts out what it means to be “mother” or “father” before being able to give a spoken account of what those roles mean).[116] The act of making a ritual sacrifice to God was an early and sophisticated enactment of the idea of the usefulness of delay. There is a long conceptual journey between merely feasting hungrily and learning to set aside some extra meat, smoked by the fire, for the end of the day, or for someone who isn’t present. It takes a long time to learn to keep anything later for yourself, or to share it with someone else (and those are very much the same thing as, in the former case, you are sharing with your future self). It is much easier and far more likely to selfishly and immediately wolf down everything in sight. There are similar long journeys between every leap in sophistication with regard to delay and its conceptualization: short-term sharing, storing away for the future, representation of that storage in the form of records and, later, in the form of currency—and, ultimately, the saving of money in a bank or other social institution. Some conceptualizations had to serve as intermediaries, or the full range of our practices and ideas surrounding sacrifice and work and their representation could have never emerged.

Our ancestors acted out a drama, a fiction: they personified the force that governs fate as a spirit that can be bargained with, traded with, as if it were another human being. And the amazing thing is *that it worked*. This was in part because the future is largely composed of other human beings—often precisely those who have watched and evaluated and appraised the tiniest details of your past behavior. It's not very far from that to God, sitting above on high, tracking your every move and writing it down for further reference in a big book. Here's a productive symbolic idea: *the future is a judgmental father*. That's a good start. But two additional, archetypal, foundational questions arose, because of the discovery of sacrifice, of work. Both have to do with the ultimate extension of the logic of work—which is *sacrifice now, to gain later*.

First question. What must be sacrificed? Small sacrifices may be sufficient to solve small, singular problems. But it is possible that larger, more comprehensive sacrifices might solve an array of large and complex problems, all at the same time. That's harder, but it might be better. Adapting to the necessary discipline of medical school will, for example, fatally interfere with the licentious lifestyle of a hardcore undergraduate party animal. Giving that up is a sacrifice. But a physician can—to paraphrase George W.—really put food on his family. That's a lot of trouble dispensed with, over a very long period of time. So, sacrifices are necessary, to improve the future, and larger sacrifices can be better.

Second question (set of related questions, really): We've already established the basic principle—*sacrifice will improve the future*. But a principle, once established, has to be fleshed out. Its full extension or significance has to be understood. What is implied by the idea that sacrifice will improve the future, in the most extreme and final of cases? Where does that basic principle find its limits? We must ask, to begin, "What would be the largest, most effective—most pleasing—of all possible sacrifices?" and then "How good might the best possible future be, if the most effective sacrifice could be made?"

The biblical story of Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's sons, immediately follows the story of the expulsion from Paradise, as mentioned previously. Cain and Abel are really the first humans, since their parents were made directly by God, and not born in the standard manner. Cain and Abel live *in history*, not in Eden. They must work. They must make sacrifices, to please

God, and they do so, with altar and proper ritual. But things get complicated. Abel's offerings please God, but Cain's do not. Abel is rewarded, many times over, but Cain is not. It's not precisely clear why (although the text strongly hints that Cain's heart is just not in it). Maybe the quality of what Cain put forward was low. Maybe his spirit was begrudging. Or maybe God was vexed, for some secret reasons of His own. And all of this is realistic, including the text's vagueness of explanation. Not all sacrifices are of equal quality. Furthermore, it often appears that sacrifices of apparently high quality are not rewarded with a better future—and it's not clear why. Why isn't God happy? What would have to change to make Him so? Those are difficult questions—and everyone asks them, all the time, even if they don't notice.

Asking such questions is indistinguishable from thinking.

The realization that pleasure could be usefully forestalled dawned on us with great difficulty. It runs absolutely contrary to our ancient, fundamental animal instincts, which demand immediate satisfaction (particularly under conditions of deprivation, which are both inevitable and commonplace). And, to complicate the matter, such delay only becomes useful when civilization has stabilized itself enough to guarantee the existence of the delayed reward, in the future. If everything you save will be destroyed or, worse, stolen, there is no point in saving. It is for this reason that a wolf will down twenty pounds of raw meat in a single meal. He isn't thinking, "Man, I hate it when I binge. I should save some of this for next week." So how was it that those two impossible and necessarily simultaneous accomplishments (delay and the stabilization of society into the future) could possibly have manifested themselves?

Here is a developmental progression, from animal to human. It's wrong, no doubt, in the details. But it's sufficiently correct, for our purposes, in theme: First, there is excess food. Large carcasses, mammoths or other massive herbivores, might provide that. (We ate a lot of mammoths. Maybe all of them.) After a kill, with a large animal, there is some left for later. That's accidental, at first—but, eventually, the utility of "for later" starts to be appreciated. Some provisional notion of sacrifice develops at the same time: "If I leave some, even if I want it now, I won't have to be hungry later." That provisional notion develops, to the next level ("If I leave some for later, I won't have to go hungry, and neither will those I care for") and then to the

next ("I can't possibly eat all of this mammoth, but I can't store the rest for too long, either. Maybe I should feed some to other people. Maybe they'll remember, and feed me some of their mammoth, when they have some and I have none. Then I'll get some mammoth now, *and* some mammoth later. That's a good deal. And maybe those I'm sharing with will come to trust me, more generally. Maybe then we could trade forever"). In such a manner, "mammoth" becomes "future mammoth," and "future mammoth" becomes "personal reputation." That's the emergence of the social contract.

To share does not mean to give away something you value, and get nothing back. That is instead only what every child who refuses to share fears it means. To share means, properly, to initiate the process of trade. A child who can't share—who can't trade—can't have any friends, because having friends is a form of trade. Benjamin Franklin once suggested that a newcomer to a neighbourhood ask a new neighbour to do him or her a favour, citing an old maxim: *He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged*.[117] In Franklin's opinion, asking someone for something (not too extreme, obviously) was the most useful and immediate invitation to social interaction. Such asking on the part of the newcomer provided the neighbour with an opportunity to show him- or herself as a good person, at first encounter. It also meant that the latter could now ask the former for a favour, in return, because of the debt incurred, increasingly their mutual familiarity and trust. In that manner both parties could overcome their natural hesitancy and mutual fear of the stranger.

It is better to have something than nothing. It's better yet to share generously the something you have. It's even better than that, however, to become widely known for generous sharing. That's something that lasts. That's something that's reliable. And, at this point of abstraction, we can observe how the groundwork for the conceptions *reliable*, *honest* and *generous* has been laid. The basis for an articulated morality has been put in place. The productive, truthful sharer is the prototype for the good citizen, and the good man. We can see in this manner how from the simple notion that "leftovers are a good idea" the highest moral principles might emerge.

It's as if something like the following happened as humanity developed. First were the endless tens or hundreds of thousands of years prior to the emergence of written history and drama. During this time, the twin practices

of delay and exchange begin to emerge, slowly and painfully. Then they become represented, in metaphorical abstraction, as rituals and tales of sacrifice, told in a manner such as this: "It's *as if* there is a powerful Figure in the Sky, who sees all, and is judging you. Giving up something you value seems to make Him happy—and you want to make Him happy, because all Hell breaks loose if you don't. So, practise sacrificing, and sharing, until you become expert at it, and things will go well for you."[fn1] No one said any of this, at least not so plainly and directly. But it was implicit in the practice and then in the stories.

Action came first (as it had to, as the animals we once were could act but could not think). *Implicit, unrecognized value came first* (as the actions that preceded thought embodied value, but did not make that value explicit). People watched the successful succeed and the unsuccessful fail for thousands and thousands of years. We thought it over, and drew a conclusion: *The successful among us delay gratification*. *The successful among us bargain with the future*. A great idea begins to emerge, taking ever-more-clearly-articulated form, in ever more-clearly-articulated stories: What's the difference between the successful and the unsuccessful? *The successful sacrifice*. Things get better, as the successful practise their sacrifices. The questions become increasingly precise and, simultaneously, broader: What is the greatest possible sacrifice? For the greatest possible good? And the answers become increasingly deeper and profound.

The God of Western tradition, like so many gods, requires sacrifice. We have already examined why. But sometimes He goes even further. He demands not only sacrifice, but the sacrifice of precisely what is loved best. This is most starkly portrayed (and most confusingly evident) in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, beloved of God, long wanted a son—and God promised him exactly that, after many delays, and under the apparently impossible conditions of old age and a long-barren wife. But not so long afterward, when the miraculously-borne Isaac is still a child, God turns around and in unreasonable and apparently barbaric fashion demands that His faithful servant offer his son as a sacrifice. The story ends happily: God sends an angel to stay Abraham's obedient hand and accepts a ram in Isaac's stead. That's a good thing, but it doesn't really address the issue at hand: Why is

God’s going further necessary? Why does He—why does life—impose such demands?

We’ll start our analysis with a truism, stark, self-evident and understated: *Sometimes things do not go well*. That seems to have much to do with the terrible nature of the world, with its plagues and famines and tyrannies and betrayals. But here’s the rub: *sometimes, when things are not going well, it’s not the world that’s the cause. The cause is instead that which is currently most valued, subjectively and personally*. Why? Because the world is revealed, to an indeterminate degree, through the template of your values (much more on this in Rule 10). If the world you are seeing is not the world you want, therefore, it’s time to examine your values. It’s time to rid yourself of your current presuppositions. It’s time to let go. It might even be time to sacrifice what you love best, so that you can become who you might become, instead of staying who you are.

There’s an old and possibly apocryphal story about how to catch a monkey that illustrates this set of ideas very well. First, you must find a large, narrow-necked jar, just barely wide enough in diameter at the top for a monkey to put its hand inside. Then you must fill the jar part way with rocks, so it is too heavy for a monkey to carry. Then you must to scatter some treats, attractive to monkeys, near the jar, to attract one, and put some more inside the jar. A monkey will come along, reach into the narrow opening, and grab while the grabbing’s good. But now he won’t be able to extract his fist, now full of treats, from the too-narrow opening of the jar. Not without unclenching his hand. Not without relinquishing what he already has. And that’s just what he won’t do. The monkey-catcher can just walk over to the jar and pick up the monkey. The animal will not sacrifice the part to preserve the whole.

Something valuable, given up, ensures future prosperity. Something valuable, sacrificed, pleases the Lord. What is most valuable, and best sacrificed?—or, what is at least *emblematic of that*? A choice cut of meat. The best animal in a flock. A most valued possession. What’s above even that? Something intensely personal and painful to give up. That’s symbolized, perhaps, in God’s insistence on circumcision as part of Abraham’s sacrificial routine, where the part is offered, symbolically, to redeem the whole. What’s beyond that? What pertains more closely to the whole person, rather than the part? What constitutes the ultimate sacrifice—for the gain of the ultimate prize?

It’s a close race between child and self. The sacrifice of the mother, offering her child to the world, is exemplified profoundly by Michelangelo’s great sculpture, the *Pietà*, illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. Michelangelo crafted Mary contemplating her Son, crucified and ruined. It’s *her fault*. It was through her that He entered the world and its great drama of Being. *Is it right to bring a baby into this terrible world?* Every woman asks herself that question. Some say no, and they have their reasons. Mary answers yes, voluntarily, knowing full well what’s to come—as do all mothers, if they allow themselves to see. It’s an act of supreme courage, when undertaken voluntarily.

In turn, Mary’s son, Christ, offers Himself to God and the world, to betrayal, torture and death—to the very point of despair on the cross, where he cries out those terrible words: *my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46). That is the archetypal story of the man who gives his all for the sake of the better—who offers up his life for the advancement of Being—who allows God’s will to become manifest fully within the confines of a single, mortal life. That is the model for the honourable man. In Christ’s case, however—as He sacrifices Himself—God, His Father, is simultaneously sacrificing *His* son. It is for this reason that the Christian sacrificial drama of Son and Self is archetypal. It’s a story at the limit, where nothing more extreme—nothing greater—can be imagined. That’s the very definition of “archetypal.” That’s the core of what constitutes “religious.”

Pain and suffering define the world. Of that, there can be no doubt. Sacrifice can hold pain and suffering in abeyance, to a greater or lesser degree—and greater sacrifices can do that more effectively than lesser. Of that, there can be no doubt. Everyone holds this knowledge in their soul. Thus, the person who wishes to alleviate suffering—who wishes to rectify the flaws in Being; who wants to bring about the best of all possible futures; who wants to create Heaven on Earth—will make the greatest of sacrifices, of self and child, of everything that is loved, to live a life aimed at the Good. He will forego expediency. He will pursue the path of ultimate meaning. And he will in that manner bring salvation to the ever-desperate world.

But is such a thing even possible? Is this simply not asking too much of the individual? It’s all well and good for Christ, it might be objected—but He was the veritable Son of God. But we do have other examples, some much less mythologized and archetypal. Consider, for example, the case of

Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher. After a lifetime of seeking the truth and educating his countrymen, Socrates faced a trial for crimes against the city-state of Athens, his hometown. His accusers provided him with plenty of opportunity to simply leave, and avoid the trouble.[118] But the great sage had already considered and rejected this course of action. His companion Hermogenes observed him at this time discussing "any and every subject"[119] other than his trial, and asked him why he appeared so unconcerned. Socrates first answered that he had been preparing his whole life to defend himself,[120] but then said something more mysterious and significant: When he attempted specifically to consider strategies that would produce acquittal "by fair means or foul"[121]—or even when merely considering his potential actions at the trial[122]—he found himself interrupted by his divine sign: his internal spirit, voice or *daemon*. Socrates discussed this voice at the trial itself.[123] He said that one of the factors distinguishing him from other men[124] was his absolute willingness to listen to its warnings—to *stop speaking* and *cease acting* when it objected. The Gods themselves had deemed him wise above other men, not least for this reason, according to the Delphic Oracle herself, held to be a reliable judge of such things."[125]

Because his ever-reliable internal voice objected to fleeing (or even to defending himself) Socrates radically altered his view of the significance of his trial. He began to consider that it might be a blessing, rather than a curse. He told Hermogenes of his realization that the spirit to whom he had always listened might be offering him a way out of life, in a manner "easiest but also the least irksome to one's friends,"[126] with "sound body and a spirit capable of showing kindliness"[127] and absent the "throes of illness" and vexations of extreme old age.[128] Socrates' decision to accept his fate allowed him to put away mortal terror in the face of death itself, prior to and during the trial, after the sentence was handed down,[129] and even later, during his execution.[130] He saw that his life had been so rich and full that he could let it go, gracefully. He was given the opportunity to put his affairs in order. He saw that he could escape the terrible slow degeneration of the advancing years. He came to understand all that was happening to him as a gift from the gods. He was not therefore required to defend himself against his accusers—at least not with the aim of pronouncing his innocence, and escaping his fate.

Instead, he turned the tables, addressing his judges in a manner that makes the reader understand precisely why the town council wanted this man dead. Then he took his poison, like a man.

Socrates rejected expediency, and the necessity for manipulation that accompanied it. He chose instead, under the direst of conditions, to maintain his pursuit of the meaningful and the true. Twenty-five hundred years later, we remember his decision and take comfort from it. What can we learn from this? If you cease to utter falsehoods and live according to the dictates of your conscience, you can maintain your nobility, even when facing the ultimate threat; if you abide, truthfully and courageously, by the highest of ideals, you will be provided with more security and strength than will be offered by any short-sighted concentration on your own safety; if you live properly, fully, you can discover meaning so profound that it protects you even from the fear of death.

Could all that possibly be true?

Death, Toil and Evil

The tragedy of self-conscious Being produces suffering, inevitable suffering. That suffering in turn motivates the desire for selfish, immediate gratification—for expediency. But sacrifice—and work—serves far more effectively than short-term impulsive pleasure at keeping suffering at bay. However, tragedy itself (conceived of as the arbitrary harshness of society and nature, set against the vulnerability of the individual) is not the only—and perhaps not even the primary—source of suffering. There is also the problem of evil to consider. The world is set hard against us, of a certainty, but man’s inhumanity to man is something even worse. Thus, the problem of sacrifice is compounded in its complexity: it is not only privation and mortal limitation that must be addressed by work—by the willingness to offer, and to give up. It is the problem of evil as well.

Consider, once again, the story of Adam and Eve. Life becomes very hard for their children (that’s us) after the fall and awakening of our archetypal parents. First is the terrible fate awaiting us in the post-Paradisal world—in the world of history. Not the least of this is what Goethe called “our creative, endless toil.”[131] Humans work, as we have seen. We work because we have awakened to the truth of our own vulnerability, our subjugation to disease

and death, and wish to protect ourselves for as long as possible. Once we can see the future, we must prepare for it, or live in denial and terror. We therefore sacrifice the pleasures of today for the sake of a better tomorrow. But the realization of mortality and the necessity of work is not the only revelation to Adam and Eve when they eat the forbidden Fruit, wake up, and open their eyes. They were also granted (or cursed by) the knowledge of Good and Evil.

It took me decades to understand what that means (to understand even part of what that means). It's this: once you become consciously aware that you, yourself, are vulnerable, you understand the nature of human vulnerability, in general. You understand what it's like to be fearful, and angry, and resentful, and bitter. You understand what pain means. And once you truly understand such feelings in yourself, and how they're produced, *you understand how to produce them in others*. It is in this manner that the self-conscious beings that we are become voluntarily and exquisitely capable of tormenting others (and ourselves, of course—but it's the others we are concerned about right now). We see the consequences of this new knowledge manifest themselves when we meet Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve.

By the time of their appearance, mankind has learned to make sacrifices to God. On altars of stone, designed for that purpose, a communal ritual is performed: the immolation of something valuable, a choice animal or portion thereof, and its transformation through fire to the smoke (to the spirit) that rises to Heaven above. In this manner, the idea of delay is dramatized, so that the future might improve. Abel's sacrifices are accepted by God, and he flourishes. Cain's, however, are rejected. He becomes jealous and bitter—and it's no wonder. If someone fails and is rejected because he refused to make any sacrifices at all—well, that's at least understandable. He may still feel resentful and vengeful, but knows in his heart that he is personally to blame. That knowledge generally places a limit on his outrage. It's much worse, however, if he had actually foregone the pleasures of the moment—if he had strived and toiled and things still didn't work out—if he was rejected, despite his efforts. Then he's lost the present *and* the future. Then his work—his sacrifice—has been pointless. Under such conditions, the world darkens, and the soul rebels.

Cain is outraged by his rejection. He confronts God, accuses Him, and curses His creation. That proves to be a very poor decision. God responds, in

no uncertain terms, that the fault is all with Cain—and worse: that Cain has knowingly and creatively dallied with sin,[132] and reaped the consequences. This is not at all what Cain wanted to hear. It's by no means an apology on God's part. Instead, it's insult, added to injury. Cain, embittered to the core by God's response, plots revenge. He defies the creator, audaciously. It's daring. Cain knows how to hurt. He's self-conscious, after all—and has become even more so, in his suffering and shame. So, he murders Abel in cold blood. He kills his brother, his own ideal (as Abel is everything Cain wishes to be). He commits this most terrible of crimes to spite himself, all of mankind, and God Himself, all at once. He does it to wreak havoc and gain his vengeance. He does it to register his fundamental opposition to existence—to protest the intolerable vagaries of Being itself. And Cain's children—the offspring, as it were of both his body and his decision—are worse. In his existential fury, Cain kills once. Lamech, his descendant, goes much further. "I have slain a man to my wounding," says Lamech," and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold" (Genesis 4:23-24). Tubulcain, an instructor of "every artificer in brass and iron" (Genesis 4:22), is by tradition seven generations from Cain—and the first creator of weapons of war. And next, in the Genesis stories, comes the flood. The juxtaposition is by no means accidental.

Evil enters the world with self-consciousness. The toil with which God curses Adam—that's bad enough. The trouble in childbirth with which Eve is burdened and her consequent dependence on her husband are no trivial matters, either. They are indicative of the implicit and oft-agonizing tragedies of insufficiency, privation, brute necessity and subjugation to illness and death that simultaneously define and plague existence. Their mere factual reality is sometimes sufficient to turn even a courageous person against life. It has been my experience, however, that human beings are strong enough to tolerate the implicit tragedies of Being without faltering—without breaking or, worse, breaking bad. I have seen evidence of this repeatedly in my private life, in my work as a professor, and in my role as a clinical practitioner. Earthquakes, floods, poverty, cancer—we're tough enough to take on all of that. But human evil adds a whole new dimension of misery to the world. It is for this reason that the rise of self-consciousness and its attendant realization of mortality and knowledge of Good and Evil is presented in the early

chapters of Genesis (and in the vast tradition that surrounds them) as a cataclysm of cosmic magnitude.

Conscious human malevolence can break the spirit even tragedy could not shake. I remember discovering (with her) that one of my clients had been shocked into years of serious post-traumatic stress disorder—daily physical shaking and terror, and chronic nightly insomnia—by the mere expression on her enraged, drunken boyfriend's face. His "fallen countenance" (Genesis 4:5) indicated his clear and conscious desire to do her harm. She was more naïve than she should have been, and that predisposed her to the trauma, but that's not the point: the voluntary evil we do one another can be profoundly and permanently damaging, even to the strong. And what is it, precisely, that motivates such evil?

It doesn't make itself manifest merely in consequence of the hard lot of life. It doesn't even emerge, simply, because of failure itself, or because of the disappointment and bitterness that failure often and understandably engenders. But the hard lot of life, magnified by the consequence of continually rejected sacrifices (however poorly conceptualized; however half-heartedly executed)? That will bend and twist people into the truly monstrous forms who then begin, consciously, to work evil; who then begin to generate for themselves and others little besides pain and suffering (and who do it for the sake of that pain and suffering). In that manner, a truly vicious circle takes hold: begrudging sacrifice, half-heartedly undertaken; rejection of that sacrifice by God or by reality (take your pick); angry resentment, generated by that rejection; descent into bitterness and the desire for revenge; sacrifice undertaken even more begrudgingly, or refused altogether. And it's Hell itself that serves as the destination place of that downward spiral.

Life is indeed "nasty, brutish and short," as the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes so memorably remarked. But man's capacity for evil makes it worse. This means that the central problem of life—the dealing with its brute facts—is not merely what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering, but what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering *and evil—the conscious and voluntary and vengeful source of the worst suffering*. The story of Cain and Abel is one manifestation of the archetypal tale of the hostile brothers, hero and adversary: the two elements of the individual human psyche, one aimed up, at the Good, and the other, down, at Hell itself. Abel is a hero, true: but a hero who is ultimately defeated by Cain. Abel could please God—a

non-trivial and unlikely accomplishment—but he could not overcome human evil. For this reason, Abel is archetypally incomplete. Perhaps he was naive, although a vengeful brother can be inconceivably treacherous and *subtil*, like the snake in Genesis 3:1. But excuses—even reasons—even understandable reasons—don't matter; not in the final analysis. The problem of evil remained unsolved even by the divinely acceptable sacrifices of Abel. It took thousands of additional years for humanity to come up with anything else resembling a solution. The same issue emerges again, in its culminating form, the story of Christ and his temptation by Satan. But this time it's expressed more comprehensively—and the hero wins.

Evil, Confronted

Jesus was led into the wilderness, according to the story, "to be tempted by the Devil" (Matthew 4:1), prior to his crucifixion. This is the story of Cain, restated abstractly. Cain is neither content nor happy, as we have seen. He's working hard, or so he thinks, but God is not pleased. Meanwhile, Abel is, by all appearances, dancing his way through life. His crops flourish. Women love him. Worst of all, he's a genuinely good man. Everyone knows it. He deserves his good fortune. All the more reason to envy and hate him. Things do not progress well for Cain, by contrast, and he broods on his misfortune, like a vulture on an egg. He strives, in his misery, to give birth to something hellish and, in doing so, enters the desert wilderness of his own mind. He obsesses over his ill fortune; his betrayal by God. He nourishes his resentment. He indulges in ever more elaborate fantasies of revenge. And as he does so, his arrogance grows to Luciferian proportions. "I'm ill-used and oppressed," he thinks. "This is a stupid bloody planet. As far as I'm concerned, it can go to Hell." And with that, Cain encounters Satan in the wilderness, for all intents and purposes, and falls prey to his temptations. And he does what he can to make things as bad as possible, motivated by (in John Milton's imperishable words):

> *So deep a malice, to confound the Race*
> *Of Mankind in one Root, and Earth with Hell*
> *to mingle and involve—done all to spite*
> *the Great Creator …*[133]

Cain turns to Evil to obtain what Good denied him, and he does it voluntarily, self-consciously and with malice aforethought.

Christ takes a different path. His sojourn in the desert is the dark night of the soul—a deeply human and universal human experience. It's the journey to that place each of us goes when things fall apart, friends and family are distant, hopelessness and despair reign, and black nihilism beckons. And, let us suggest, in testament to the exactitude of the story: forty days and nights starving alone in the wilderness might take you exactly to that place. It is in such a manner that the objective and subjective worlds come crashing, synchronistically, together. Forty days is a deeply symbolic period of time, echoing the forty years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert after escaping the tyranny of Pharaoh and Egypt. Forty days is a long time in the underworld of dark assumptions, confusion and fear—long enough to journey to the very center, which is Hell itself. A journey there to see the sights can be undertaken by anyone—anyone, that is, who is willing to take the evil of self and Man with sufficient seriousness. A bit of familiarity with history can help. A sojourn through the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, with its concentration camps, forced labor and murderous ideological pathologies is as good a place as any to start—that, and some consideration of the fact that worst of the concentration camp guards were human, all-too-human, too. That's all part of making the desert story real again; part of updating it, for the modern mind.

"After Auschwitz," said Theodor Adorno, student of authoritarianism, "there should be no poetry." He was wrong. But the poetry should be about Auschwitz. In the grim wake of the last ten decades of the previous millennium, the terrible destructiveness of man has become a problem whose seriousness self-evidently dwarfs even the problem of unredeemed suffering. And neither one of those problems is going to be solved in the absence of a solution to the other. This is where the idea of Christ's taking on the sins of mankind as if they were His own becomes key, opening the door to deep understanding of the desert encounter with the devil himself. "*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto,*" said the Roman playwright Terence: nothing human is alien to me.

"No tree can grow to Heaven," adds the ever-terrifying Carl Gustav Jung, psychoanalyst extraordinaire, "unless its roots reach down to Hell."[134] Such a

statement should give everyone who encounters it pause. There was no possibility for movement upward, in that great psychiatrist's deeply considered opinion, without a corresponding move down. It is for this reason that enlightenment is so rare. Who is willing to do that? Do you really want to meet who's in charge, at the very bottom of the most wicked thoughts? What did Eric Harris, mass murderer of the Columbine high school, write so incomprehensibly the very day prior to massacring his classmates? *It's interesting, when I'm in my human form, knowing I'm going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it.*[135] Who would dare explain such a missive?—or, worse, explain it away?

In the desert, Christ encounters Satan (see Luke 4:1–13 and Matthew 4:1–11). This story has a clear psychological meaning—a metaphorical meaning—in addition to whatever else material and metaphysical alike it might signify. It means that Christ *is forever He who determines to take personal responsibility for the full depth of human depravity*. It means that Christ is eternally He who is willing to confront and deeply consider and risk the temptations posed by the most malevolent elements of human nature. It means that Christ is always he who is willing to confront evil—consciously, fully and voluntarily—in the form that dwelt simultaneously within Him and in the world. This is nothing merely abstract (although it is abstract); nothing to be brushed over. It's no merely intellectual matter.

Soldiers who develop post-traumatic stress disorder frequently develop it not because of something they saw, but because of something they did.[136] There are many demons, so to speak, on the battlefield. Involvement in warfare is something that can open a gateway to Hell. Now and then something climbs through and possesses some naive farm-boy from Iowa, and he turns monstrous. He does something terrible. He rapes and kills the women and massacres the infants of My Lai. And he watches himself do it. And some dark part of him enjoys it—and that is the part that is most unforgettable. And, later, he will not know how to reconcile himself with the reality about himself and the world that was then revealed. And no wonder.

In the great and fundamental myths of ancient Egypt, the god Horus—often regarded as a precursor to Christ, historically and conceptually speaking[137]—experienced the same thing, when he confronted his evil uncle Set,[fn2] usurper of the throne of Osiris, Horus's father. Horus, the all-seeing

Egyptian falcon god, the Egyptian eye of supreme, eternal attention itself, has the courage to contend with Set's true nature, meeting him in direct combat. In the struggle with his dread uncle, however, his consciousness is damaged. He loses an eye. This is despite his godly stature and his unparalleled capacity for vision. What would a mere man lose, who attempted the same thing? But perhaps he might gain in internal vision and understanding something proportional to what he loses in perception of the outside world.

Satan embodies the refusal of sacrifice; he is arrogance, incarnate; spite, deceit, and cruel, conscious malevolence. He is pure hatred of Man, God and Being. He will not humble himself, even when he knows full well that he should. Furthermore, he knows exactly what he is doing, obsessed with the desire for destruction, and does it deliberately, thoughtfully and completely. It has to be him, therefore—the very archetype of Evil—who confronts and tempts Christ, the archetype of Good. It must be him who offers to the Savior of Mankind, under the most trying of conditions, what all men most ardently desire.

Satan first tempts the starving Christ to quell His hunger by transforming the desert rocks into bread. Then he suggests that He throw Himself off a cliff, calling on God and the angels to break His fall. Christ responds to the first temptation by saying, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." What does this answer mean? It means that even under conditions of extreme privation, there are more important things than food. To put it another way: Bread is of little use to the man who has betrayed his soul, even if he is currently starving.[fn3] Christ could clearly use his near-infinite power, as Satan indicates, to gain bread, now—to break his fast—even, in the broader sense, to gain wealth, in the world (which would theoretically solve the problem of bread, more permanently). But at what cost? And to what gain? Gluttony, in the midst of moral desolation? That's the poorest and most miserable of feasts. Christ aims, therefore, at something higher: at the description of a mode of Being that would finally and forever solve the problem of hunger. If we all chose instead of expedience to dine on the Word of God? That would require each and every person to live, and produce, and sacrifice, and speak, and share in a manner that would permanently render the privation of hunger a thing of the

past. And that’s how the problem of hunger in the privations of the desert is most truly and finally addressed.

There are other indications of this in the gospels, in dramatic, enacted form. Christ is continually portrayed as the purveyor of endless sustenance. He miraculously multiplies bread and fish. He turns water into wine. What does this mean? It’s a call to the pursuit of higher meaning as the mode of living that is simultaneously most practical and of highest quality. It’s a call portrayed in dramatic/literary form: live as the archetypal Saviour lives, and you and those around you will hunger no more. The beneficence of the world manifests itself to those who live properly. That’s better than bread. That’s better than the money that will buy bread. Thus Christ, the symbolically perfect individual, overcomes the first temptation. Two more follow.

“Throw yourself off that cliff,” Satan says, offering the next temptation. “If God exists, He will surely save you. If you are in fact his Son, God will surely save you.” Why would God not make Himself manifest, to rescue His only begotten Child from hunger and isolation and the presence of great evil? But that establishes no pattern for life. It doesn’t even work as literature. The *deus ex machina*—the emergence of a divine force that magically rescues the hero from his predicament—is the cheapest trick in the hack writer’s playbook. It makes a mockery of independence, and courage, and destiny, and free will, and responsibility. Furthermore, God is in no wise a safety net for the blind. He’s not someone to be commanded to perform magic tricks, or forced into Self-revelation—not even by His own Son.

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matthew 4:7)—this answer, though rather brief, dispenses with the second temptation. Christ does not casually order or even dare ask God to intervene on his behalf. He refuses to dispense with His responsibility for the events of His own life. He refuses to demand that God prove His presence. He refuses, as well, to solve the problems of mortal vulnerability in a merely personal manner)—by compelling God to save Him—because that would not solve the problem for everyone else and for all time. There is also the echo of the rejection of the comforts of insanity in this forgone temptation. Easy but psychotic self-identification as the merely magical Messiah might well have been a genuine temptation under the harsh conditions of Christ’s sojourn in the desert. Instead He rejects the idea that salvation—or even survival, in the shorter

term—depends on narcissistic displays of superiority and the commanding of God, even by His Son.

Finally comes the third temptation, the most compelling of all. Christ sees the kingdoms of the world laid before Him for the taking. That's the siren call of earthly power: the opportunity to control and order everyone and everything. Christ is offered the pinnacle of the dominance hierarchy, the animalistic desire of every naked ape: the obedience of all, the most wondrous of estates, the power to build and to increase, the possibility of unlimited sensual gratification. That's expedience, writ large. But that's not all. Such expansion of status also provides unlimited opportunity for the inner darkness to reveal itself. The lust for blood, rape and destruction is very much part of power's attraction. It is not only that men desire power so that they will no longer suffer. It is not only that they desire power so that they can overcome subjugation to want, disease and death. Power also means the capacity to take vengeance, ensure submission, and crush enemies. Grant Cain enough power and he will not only kill Abel. He will torture him, first, imaginatively and endlessly. Then and only then will he kill him. Then he will come after everyone else.

There's something above even the pinnacle of the highest of dominance hierarchies, access to which should not be sacrificed for mere proximal success. It's a real place, too, although not to be conceptualized in the standard geographical sense of place we typically use to orient ourselves. I had a vision, once, of an immense landscape, spread for miles out to the horizon before me. I was high in the air, granted a bird's-eye view. Everywhere I could see great stratified multi-storied pyramids of glass, some small, some large, some overlapping, some separate—all akin to modern skyscrapers; all full of people striving to reach each pyramid's very pinnacle. But there was something above that pinnacle, a domain outside each pyramid, in which all were nested. That was the privileged position of the eye that could or perhaps chose to soar freely above the fray; that chose not to dominate any specific group or cause but instead to somehow simultaneously transcend all. That was attention, itself, pure and untrammeled: detached, alert, watchful attention, waiting to act when the time was right and the place had been established. As the Tao te Ching has it:

> *He who contrives, defeats his purpose;*
> *and he who is grasping, loses.*

The sage does not contrive to win,
and therefore is not defeated;
he is not grasping, so does not lose.[138]

There is a powerful call to proper Being in the story of the third temptation. To obtain the greatest possible prize—the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, the resurrection of Paradise—the individual must conduct his or her life in a manner that requires the rejection of immediate gratification, of natural and perverse desires alike, no matter how powerfully and convincingly and realistically those are offered, and dispense, as well with the temptations of evil. Evil amplifies the catastrophe of life, increasing dramatically the motivation for expediency already there because of the essential tragedy of Being. Sacrifice of the more prosaic sort can keep that tragedy at bay, more or less successfully, but it takes a special kind of sacrifice to defeat evil. It is the description of that special sacrifice that has preoccupied the Christian (and more than Christian) imagination for centuries. Why has it not had the desired effect? Why do we remain unconvinced that there is no better plan than lifting our heads skyward, aiming at the Good, and sacrificing everything to that ambition? Have we merely failed to understand, or have we fallen, wilfully or otherwise, off the path?

Christianity and its Problems

Carl Jung hypothesized that the European mind found itself motivated to develop the cognitive technologies of science—to investigate the material world—after implicitly concluding that Christianity, with its laser-like emphasis on spiritual salvation, had failed to sufficiently address the problem of suffering in the here-and-now. This realization became unbearably acute in the three or four centuries before the Renaissance. In consequence, a strange, profound, compensatory fantasy began to emerge, deep in the collective Western psyche, manifesting itself first in the strange musings of alchemy, and developing only after many centuries into the fully articulated form of science.[139] It was the alchemists who first seriously began to examine the transformations of matter, hoping to discover the secrets of health, wealth and longevity. These great dreamers (Newton foremost among them[140]) intuited and then imagined that the material world, damned by the Church, held

secrets the revelation of which could free humanity from its earthly pain and limitations. It was that vision, driven by doubt, that provided the tremendous collective and individual motivational power necessary for the development of science, with its extreme demands on individual thinkers for concentration and delay of gratification.

This is not to say that Christianity, even in its incompletely realized form, was a failure. Quite the contrary: Christianity achieved the well-nigh impossible. The Christian doctrine elevated the individual soul, placing slave and master and commoner and nobleman alike on the same metaphysical footing, rendering them equal before God and the law. Christianity insisted that even the king was only one among many. For something so contrary to all apparent evidence to find its footing, the idea that that worldly power and prominence were indicators of God's particular favor had to be radically de-emphasized. This was partly accomplished through the strange Christian insistence that salvation could not be obtained through effort or worth—through "works."[141] Whatever its limitations, the development of such doctrine prevented king, aristocrat and wealthy merchant alike from lording it morally over the commoner. In consequence, the metaphysical conception of the implicit transcendent worth of each and every soul established itself against impossible odds as the fundamental presupposition of Western law and society. That was not the case in the world of the past, and is not the case yet in most places in the world of the present. It is in fact nothing short of a miracle (and we should keep this fact firmly before our eyes) that the hierarchical slave-based societies of our ancestors reorganized themselves, under the sway of an ethical/religious revelation, such that the ownership and absolute domination of another person came to be viewed as wrong.

It would do us well to remember, as well, that the immediate utility of slavery is obvious, and that the argument that the strong should dominate the weak is compelling, convenient and eminently practical (at least for the strong). This means that a revolutionary critique of everything slave-owning societies valued was necessary before the practice could be even questioned, let alone halted (including the idea that wielding power and authority made the slave-owner noble; including the even more fundamental idea that the power wielded by the slave-owner was valid and even virtuous). Christianity made explicit the surprising claim that even the lowliest person had rights,

genuine rights—and that sovereign and state were morally charged, at a fundamental level, to recognize those rights. Christianity put forward, explicitly, the even more incomprehensible idea that the act of human ownership degraded the slaver (previously viewed as admiring nobility) much or even more than the slave. We fail to understand how difficult such an idea is to grasp. We forget that the opposite was self-evident throughout most of human history. We think that it is the desire to enslave and dominate that requires explanation. We have it backwards, yet again.

This is not to say that Christianity was without its problems. But it is more appropriate to note that they were the sort of problems that emerge only after an entirely different set of more serious problems has been solved. The society produced by Christianity was far less barbaric than the pagan—even the Roman—ones it replaced. Christian society at least recognized that feeding slaves to ravenous lions for the entertainment of the populace was wrong, even if many barbaric practices still existed. It objected to infanticide, to prostitution, and to the principle that might means right. It insisted that women were as valuable as men (even though we are still working out how to manifest that insistence politically). It demanded that even a society's enemies be regarded as human. Finally, it separated church from state, so that all-too-human emperors could no longer claim the veneration due to gods. All of this was asking the impossible: but it happened.

As the Christian revolution progressed, however, the impossible problems it had solved disappeared from view. That's what happens to problems that are solved. And after the solution was implemented, *even the fact that such problems had ever existed disappeared from view*. Then and only then could the problems that remained, less amenable to quick solution by Christian doctrine, come to occupy a central place in the consciousness of the West—come to motivate, for example, the development of science, aimed at resolving the corporeal, material suffering that was still all-too-painfully extant within successfully Christianized societies. The fact that automobiles pollute only becomes a problem of sufficient magnitude to attract public attention when the far worse problems that the internal combustion engine solves has vanished from view. People stricken with poverty don't care about carbon dioxide. It's not precisely that CO2 levels are irrelevant. It's that they're irrelevant when you're working yourself to death, starving, scraping a bare living from the stony, unyielding, thorn-and-thistle-infested ground. It's

that they're irrelevant until after the tractor is invented and hundreds of millions stop starving. In any case, by the time Nietzsche entered the picture, in the late nineteenth century, the problems Christianity had left unsolved had become paramount.

Nietzsche described himself, with no serious overstatement, as philosophizing with a hammer.[142] His devastating critique of Christianity—already weakened by its conflict with the very science to which it had given rise—involved two main lines of attack. Nietzsche claimed, first, that it was precisely the sense of truth developed in the highest sense by Christianity itself that ultimately came to question and then to undermine the fundamental presuppositions of the faith. That was partly because the difference between moral or narrative truth and objective truth had not yet been fully comprehended (and so an opposition was presumed where none necessarily exists)—but that does not bely the point. Even when the modern atheists opposed to Christianity belittle fundamentalists for insisting, for example, that the creation account in Genesis is objectively true, they are using their sense of truth, highly developed over the centuries of Christian culture, to engage in such argumentation. Carl Jung continued to develop Nietzsche's arguments decades later, pointing out that Europe awoke, during the Enlightenment, as if from a Christian dream, noticing that everything it had heretofore taken for granted could and should be questioned. "God is dead," said Nietzsche. "God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us?"[143]

The central dogmas of the Western faith were no longer credible, according to Nietzsche, given what the Western mind now considered truth. But it was his second attack—on the removal of the true moral burden of Christianity during the development of the Church—that was most devastating. The hammer-wielding philosopher mounted an assault on an early-established and then highly influential line of Christian thinking: *that Christianity meant accepting the proposition that Christ's sacrifice, and only that sacrifice, had redeemed humanity*. This did not mean, absolutely, that a Christian who believed that Christ died on the cross for the salvation of mankind was thereby freed from any and all personal moral obligation. But it

did strongly imply that the primary responsibility for redemption had already been borne by the Saviour, and that nothing too important to do remained for all-too-fallen human individuals.

Nietzsche believed that Paul, and later the Protestants following Luther, had removed moral responsibility from Christ's followers. They had watered down the idea of *the imitation of Christ*. This imitation was the sacred duty of the believer not to adhere (or merely to mouth) a set of statements about abstract belief but instead to actually manifest the spirit of the Saviour in the particular, specific conditions of his or her life—to realize or incarnate the archetype, as Jung had it; to clothe the eternal pattern in flesh. Nietzsche writes, "The Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed them; and the impudent garrulous talk about the 'justification by faith' and its supreme and sole significance is only the consequence of the Church's lack of courage and will to profess the works Jesus demanded."[144] Nietzsche was, indeed, a critic without parallel.

Dogmatic belief in the central axioms of Christianity (that Christ's crucifixion redeemed the world; that salvation was reserved for the hereafter; that salvation could not be achieved through works) had three mutually reinforcing consequences: First, *devaluation of the significance of earthly life, as only the hereafter mattered*. This also meant that it had become acceptable to overlook and shirk responsibility for the suffering that existed in the here-and-now; Second, *passive acceptance of the status quo, because salvation could not be earned in any case through effort in this life* (a consequence that Marx also derided, with his proposition that religion was the opiate of the masses); and, finally, third, *the right of the believer to reject any real moral burden* (outside of the stated belief in salvation through Christ), *because the Son of God had already done all the important work*. It was for such reasons that Dostoevsky, who was a great influence on Nietzsche, also criticized institutional Christianity (although he arguably managed it in a more ambiguous but also more sophisticated manner). In his masterwork, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky has his atheist superman, Ivan, tell a little story, "The Grand Inquisitor."[145] A brief review is in order.

Ivan speaks to his brother Alyosha—whose pursuits as a monastic novitiate he holds in contempt—of Christ returning to Earth at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The returning Savior makes quite a ruckus, as would be

expected. He heals the sick. He raises the dead. His antics soon attract attention from the Grand Inquisitor himself, who promptly has Christ arrested and thrown into a prison cell. Later, the Inquisitor pays Him a visit. He informs Christ that he is no longer needed. His return is simply too great a threat to the Church. The Inquisitor tells Christ that the burden He laid on mankind—the burden of existence in faith and truth—was simply too great for mere mortals to bear. The Inquisitor claims that the Church, in its mercy, diluted that message, lifting the demand for perfect Being from the shoulders of its followers, providing them instead with the simple and merciful escapes of faith and the afterlife. That work took centuries, says the Inquisitor, and the last thing the Church needs after all that effort is the return of the Man who insisted that people bear all the weight in the first place. Christ listens in silence. Then, as the Inquisitor turns to leave, Christ embraces him, and kisses him on the lips. The Inquisitor turns white, in shock. Then he goes out, leaving the cell door open.

The profundity of this story and the greatness of spirit necessary to produce it can hardly be exaggerated. Dostoevsky, one of the great literary geniuses of all time, confronted the most serious existential problems in all his great writings, and he did so courageously, headlong, and heedless of the consequences. Clearly Christian, he nonetheless adamantly refuses to make a straw man of his rationalist and atheistic opponents. Quite the contrary: In *The Brothers Karamazov,* for example, Dostoevsky’s atheist, Ivan, argues against the presuppositions of Christianity with unsurpassable clarity and passion. Alyosha, aligned with the Church by temperament and decision, cannot undermine a single one of his brother’s arguments (although his faith remains unshakeable). Dostoevsky knew and admitted that Christianity had been defeated by the rational faculty—by the intellect, even—but (and this is of primary importance) *he did not hide from that fact*. He didn’t attempt through denial or deceit or even satire to weaken the position that opposed what he believed to be most true and valuable. He instead placed action above words, and addressed the problem successfully. By the novel’s end, Dostoevsky has the great embodied moral goodness of Alyosha—the novitiate’s courageous imitation of Christ—attain victory over the spectacular but ultimately nihilistic critical intelligence of Ivan.

The Christian church described by the Grand Inquisitor is the same church pilloried by Nietzsche. Childish, sanctimonious, patriarchal, servant of the

state, that church is everything rotten still objected to by modern critics of Christianity. Nietzsche, for all his brilliance, allows himself anger, but does not perhaps sufficiently temper it with judgement. This is where Dostoevsky truly transcends Nietzsche, in my estimation—where Dostoevsky's great literature transcends Nietzsche's mere philosophy. The Russian writer's Inquisitor is the genuine article, in every sense. He is an opportunistic, cynical, manipulative and cruel interrogator, willing to persecute heretics—even to torture and kill them. He is the purveyor of a dogma he knows to be false. But Dostoevsky has Christ, the archetypal perfect man, kiss him anyway. Equally importantly, in the aftermath of the kiss, the Grand Inquisitor leaves the door ajar so Christ can escape his pending execution. Dostoevsky saw that the great, corrupt edifice of Christianity still managed to make room for the spirit of its Founder. That's the gratitude of a wise and profound soul for the enduring wisdom of the West, despite its faults.

It's not as if Nietzsche was unwilling to give the faith—and, more particularly, Catholicism—its due. Nietzsche believed that the long tradition of "unfreedom" characterizing dogmatic Christianity—its insistence that everything be explained within the confines of a single, coherent metaphysical theory—was a necessary precondition for the emergence of the disciplined but free modern mind. As he stated in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> The long bondage of the spirit … the persistent spiritual will to interpret everything that happened according to a Christian scheme, and in every occurrence to rediscover and justify the Christian God in every accident:—all this violence, arbitrariness, severity, dreadfulness, and unreasonableness, has proved itself the disciplinary means whereby the European spirit has attained its strength, its remorseless curiosity and subtle mobility; granted also that much irrecoverable strength and spirit had to be stifled, suffocated and spoiled in the process.[146]

For Nietzsche and Dostoevsky alike, freedom—even the ability to act—requires constraint. For this reason, they both recognized the vital necessity of the dogma of the Church. The individual must be constrained, moulded—even brought close to destruction—by a restrictive, coherent disciplinary structure, before he or she can act freely and competently. Dostoevsky, with his great generosity of spirit, granted to the church, corrupt as it might be, a certain element of mercy, a certain pragmatism. He admitted that the spirit of Christ, the world-engendering Logos, had historically and might still find its resting place—even its sovereignty—within that dogmatic structure.

If a father disciplines his son properly, he obviously interferes with his freedom, particularly in the here-and-now. He put limits on the voluntary expression of his son's Being. forcing him to take his place as a socialized member of the world. Such a father requires that all that childish potential be funneled down a singly pathway. In placing such limitations on his son, he might be considered a destructive force, acting as he does to replace the miraculous plurality of childhood with a single narrow actuality. But if the father does not take such action, he merely lets his son remain Peter Pan, the eternal Boy, King of the Lost Boys, Ruler of the non-existent Neverland. That is not a morally acceptable alternative.

The dogma of the Church was undermined by the spirit of truth strongly developed by the Church itself. That undermining culminated in the death of God. But the dogmatic structure of the Church was a necessary disciplinary structure. A long period of unfreedom—adherence to a singular interpretive structure—is necessary for the development of a free mind. Christian dogma provided that unfreedom. But the dogma is dead, at least to the modern Western mind. It perished along with God. What has emerged from behind its corpse, however—and this is an issue of central importance—is something even more dead; something that was never alive, even in the past: *nihilism, as well as an equally dangerous susceptibility to new, totalizing, utopian ideas*. It was in the aftermath of God's death that the great collective horrors of Communism and Fascism sprang forth (as both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche predicted they would). Nietzsche, for his part, posited that individual human beings would have to invent their own values in the aftermath of God's death. But this is the element of his thinking that appears weakest, psychologically: *we cannot invent our own values, because we cannot merely impose what we believe on our souls*. This was Carl Jung's great discovery—made in no little part because of his intense study of the problems posed by Nietzsche.

We rebel against our own totalitarianism, as much as that of others. I cannot merely order myself to action, and neither can you. "I will stop procrastinating," I say, but I don't. "I will eat properly," I say, but I don't. "I will end my drunken misbehavior," I say, but I don't. I cannot merely make myself over in the image constructed by my intellect (particularly if that intellect is possessed by an ideology). I have a nature, and so do you, and so do we all. We must discover that nature, and contend with it, before making peace with ourselves. What is it, that we most truly are? What is it that we

could most truly become, knowing who we most truly are? We must get to the very bottom of things before such questions can be truly answered.

Doubt, Past Mere Nihilism

Three hundred years before Nietzsche, the great French philosopher René Descartes set out on an intellectual mission to take his doubt seriously, to break things apart, to get to what was essential—to see if he could establish, or discover, a single proposition impervious to his skepticism. He was searching for the foundation stone on which proper Being could be established. Descartes found it, as far as he was concerned, in the "I" who thinks—the "I" who was aware—as expressed in his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). But that "I" had been conceptualized long before. Thousands of years ago, the aware "I" was the all-seeing eye of Horus, the great Egyptian son-and-sun-god, who renewed the state by attending to and then confronting its inevitable corruption. Before that, it was the creator-God Marduk of the Mesopotamians, whose eyes encircled his head and who spoke forth words of world-engendering magic. During the Christian epoch, the "I" transformed into the Logos, the Word that speaks order into Being at the beginning of time. It might be said that Descartes merely secularized the Logos, turning it, more explicitly, into "that which is aware and thinks." That's the modern self, simply put. But what exactly is that self?

We can understand, to some degree, its horrors, if we wish to, but its goodness remains more difficult to define. The self is the great actor of evil who strode about the stage of Being as Nazi and Stalinist alike; who produced Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and the multiplicity of the Soviet gulags. And all of that must be considered with dread seriousness. But what is its opposite? What is the good that is the necessary counterpart of that evil; that is made more corporeal and comprehensible by the very existence of that evil? And here we can state with conviction and clarity that even the rational intellect—that faculty so beloved of those who hold traditional wisdom in contempt—is at minimum something closely and necessarily akin to the archetypal dying and eternally resurrected god, the eternal savior of humanity, the Logos itself. The philosopher of science Karl Popper, certainly no mystic, regarded thinking itself as a logical extension of the Darwinian

process. A creature that cannot think must solely embody its Being. It can merely act out its nature, concretely, in the here-and-now. If it cannot manifest in its behavior what the environment demands while doing so, it will simply die. But that is not true of human beings. We can produce abstracted representations of potential modes of Being. We can produce an idea in the theatre of the imagination. We can test it out against our other ideas, the ideas of others, or the world itself. If it falls short, we can let it go. We can, in Popper's formulation, let our ideas die in our stead.[147] Then the essential part, the creator of those ideas, can continue onward, now untrammeled, by comparison, with error. *Faith in the part of us that continues across those deaths is a prerequisite to thinking itself.*

Now, an idea is not the same thing as a fact. A fact is something that is dead, in and of itself. It has no consciousness, no will to power, no motivation, no action. There are billions of dead facts. The internet is a graveyard of dead facts. But an idea that grips a person is alive. It wants to express itself, to live in the world. It is for this reason that the depth psychologists—Freud and Jung paramount among them—insisted that the human psyche was a battleground for ideas. *An idea has an aim. It wants something. It posits a value structure.* An idea believes that what it is aiming for is better than what it has now. It reduces the world to those things that aid or impede its realization, and it reduces everything else to irrelevance. An idea defines figure against ground. *An idea is a personality, not a fact*. When it manifests itself within a person, it has a strong proclivity to make of that person its avatar: to impel that person to act it out. Sometimes, that impulsion (possession is another word) can be so strong that the person will die, rather than allowing the idea to perish. This is, generally speaking, a bad decision, given that it is often the case that only the idea need die, and that the person with the idea can stop being its avatar, change his or her ways, and continue.

To use the dramatic conceptualization of our ancestors: It is the most fundamental convictions that must die—must be sacrificed—when the relationship with God has been disrupted (when the presence of undue and often intolerable suffering, for example, indicates that something has to change). This is to say nothing other than that the future can be made better if the proper sacrifices take place in the present. No other animal has ever figured this out, and it took us untold hundreds of thousands of years to do it.

It took further eons of observation and hero-worship, and then millennia of study, to distill that idea into a story. It then took additional vast stretches of time to assess that story, to incorporate it, so that we now can simply say, "If you are disciplined and privilege the future over the present you can change the structure of reality in your favour."

But how best to do that?

In 1984, I started down the same road as Descartes. I did not know it was the same road at the time, and I am not claiming kinship with Descartes, who is rightly regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of all time. But I was truly plagued with doubt. I had outgrown the shallow Christianity of my youth by the time I could understand the fundamentals of Darwinian theory. After that, I could not distinguish the basic elements of Christian belief from wishful thinking. The socialism that soon afterward became so attractive to me as an alternative proved equally insubstantial; with time, I came to understand, through the great George Orwell, that much of such thinking found its motivation in hatred of the rich and successful, instead of true regard for the poor. Besides, the socialists were more intrinsically capitalist than the capitalists. They believed just as strongly in money. They just thought that if different people had the money, the problems plaguing humanity would vanish. This is simply untrue. There are many problems that money does not solve, and others that it makes worse. Rich people still divorce each other, and alienate themselves from their children, and suffer from existential angst, and develop cancer and dementia, and die alone and unloved. Recovering addicts cursed with money blow it all in a frenzy of snorting and drunkenness. And boredom weighs heavily on people who have nothing to do.

I was simultaneously tormented by the fact of the Cold War. It obsessed me. It gave me nightmares. It drove me into the desert, into the long night of the human soul. I could not understand how it had come to pass that the world's two great factions aimed mutual assured destruction at each other. Was one system just as arbitrary and corrupt as the other? Was it a mere matter of opinion? Were all value structures merely the clothing of power?

Was everyone crazy?

Just exactly what happened in the twentieth century, anyway? How was it that so many tens of millions had to die, sacrificed to the new dogmas and ideologies? How was it that we discovered something worse, much worse,

than the aristocracy and corrupt religious beliefs that communism and fascism sought so rationally to supplant? No one had answered those questions, as far as I could tell. Like Descartes, I was plagued with doubt. I searched for one thing—anything—I could regard as indisputable. I wanted a rock upon which to build my house. It was doubt that led me to it.

I once read of a particularly insidious practice at Auschwitz. A guard would force an inmate to carry a hundred-pound sack of wet salt from one side of the large compound to the other—and then to carry it back. *Arbeit macht frei*, said the sign over the camp entrance—"Work will set you free"—and the freedom was death. Carrying the salt was an act of pointless torment. It was a piece of malevolent art. It allowed me to realize with certainty that some actions are wrong.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, definitively and profoundly, about the horrors of the twentieth century, the tens of millions who were stripped of employment, family, identity and life. In his *Gulag Archipelago*, in the second part of the second volume, he discussed the Nuremburg trials, which he considered the most significant event of the twentieth century. The conclusion of those trials? *There are some actions that are so intrinsically terrible that they run counter to the proper nature of human Being.* This is true essentially, cross-culturally—across time and place. *These are evil actions. No excuses are available for engaging in them.* To dehumanize a fellow being, to reduce him or her to the status of a parasite, to torture and to slaughter with no consideration of individual innocence or guilt, to make an art form of pain—that is wrong.

What can I not doubt? The reality of suffering. It brooks no arguments. Nihilists cannot undermine it with skepticism. Totalitarians cannot banish it. Cynics cannot escape from its reality. Suffering is real, and the artful infliction of suffering on another, for its own sake, is wrong. That became the cornerstone of my belief. Searching through the lowest reaches of human thought and action, understanding my own capacity to act like a Nazi prison guard or a gulag archipelago trustee or a torturer of children in a dungeon, I grasped what it meant to "take the sins of the world onto oneself." Each human being has an immense capacity for evil. Each human being understands, *a priori*, perhaps not what is good, but certainly what is not. And if there is something that *is not good*, then there is something that *is good*. If the worst sin is the torment of others, merely for the sake of the

suffering produced—then the good is whatever is diametrically opposed to that. The good is whatever stops such things from happening.

Meaning as the Higher Good

It was from this that I drew my fundamental moral conclusions. Aim up. Pay attention. Fix what you can fix. Don't be arrogant in your knowledge. Strive for humility, because totalitarian pride manifests itself in intolerance, oppression, torture and death. Become aware of your own insufficiency—your cowardice, malevolence, resentment and hatred. Consider the murderousness of your own spirit before you dare accuse others, and before you attempt to repair the fabric of the world. Maybe it's not the world that's at fault. Maybe it's you. You've failed to make the mark. You've missed the target. You've fallen short of the glory of God. You've sinned. And all of that is your contribution to the insufficiency and evil of the world. And, above all, don't lie. Don't lie about anything, ever. Lying leads to Hell. It was the great and the small lies of the Nazi and Communist states that produced the deaths of millions of people.

Consider then that the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering is a good. Make that an axiom: to the best of my ability I will act in a manner that leads to the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering. You have now placed at the pinnacle of your moral hierarchy a set of presuppositions and actions aimed at the betterment of Being. Why? Because we know the alternative. The alternative was the twentieth century. The alternative was so close to Hell that the difference is not worth discussing. And the opposite of Hell is Heaven. To place the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering at the pinnacle of your hierarchy of value is to work to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth. That's a state, and a state of mind, at the same time.

Jung observed that the construction of such a moral hierarchy was inevitable—although it could remain poorly arranged and internally self-contradictory. For Jung, whatever was at the top of an individual's moral hierarchy was, for all intents and purposes, that person's ultimate value, that person's god. It was what the person acted out. It was what the person believed most deeply. Something enacted is not a fact, or even a set of facts. Instead, it's a personality—or, more precisely, a choice between two opposing personalities. It's Sherlock Holmes or Moriarty. It's Batman or the

Joker. It’s Superman or Lex Luthor, Charles Francis Xavier or Magneto, and Thor or Loki. It’s Abel or Cain—and it’s Christ or Satan. If it’s working for the ennobling of Being, for the establishment of Paradise, then it’s Christ. If it’s working for the destruction of Being, for the generation and propagation of unnecessary suffering and pain, then it’s Satan. That’s the inescapable, archetypal reality.

Expedience is the following of blind impulse. It’s short-term gain. It’s narrow, and selfish. It lies to get its way. It takes nothing into account. It’s immature and irresponsible. Meaning is its mature replacement. Meaning emerges when impulses are regulated, organized and unified. Meaning emerges from the interplay between the possibilities of the world and the value structure operating within that world. If the value structure is aimed at the betterment of Being, the meaning revealed will be life-sustaining. It will provide the antidote for chaos and suffering. It will make everything matter. It will make everything better.

If you act properly, your actions allow you to be psychologically integrated now, and tomorrow, and into the future, while you benefit yourself, your family, and the broader world around you. Everything will stack up and align along a single axis. Everything will come together. This produces maximal meaning. This stacking up is a place in space and time whose existence we can detect with our ability to experience more than is simply revealed here and now by our senses, which are obviously limited to their information-gathering and representational capacity. Meaning trumps expedience. Meaning gratifies all impulses, now and forever. That’s why we can detect it.

If you decide that you are not justified in your resentment of Being, despite its inequity and pain, you may come to notice things you could fix to reduce even by a bit some unnecessary pain and suffering. You may come to ask yourself, “What should I do today?” in a manner that means “How could I use my time to make things better, instead of worse?” Such tasks may announce themselves as the pile of undone paperwork that you could attend to, the room that you could make a bit more welcoming, or the meal that could be a bit more delicious and more gratefully delivered to your family.

You may find that if you attend to these moral obligations, once you have placed “make the world better” at the top of your value hierarchy, you experience ever-deepening meaning. It’s not bliss. It’s not happiness. It is something more like atonement for the criminal fact of your fractured and

damaged Being. It’s payment of the debt you owe for the insane and horrible miracle of your existence. It’s how you remember the Holocaust. It’s how you make amends for the pathology of history. It’s adoption of the responsibility for being a potential denizen of Hell. It is willingness to serve as an angel of Paradise.

Expedience—that’s hiding all the skeletons in the closet. That’s covering the blood you just spilled with a carpet. That’s avoiding responsibility. It’s cowardly, and shallow, and wrong. It’s wrong because mere expedience, multiplied by many repetitions, produces the character of a demon. It’s wrong because expedience merely transfers the curse on your head to someone else, or to your future self, in a manner that will make your future, and the future generally, worse instead of better.

There is no faith and no courage and no sacrifice in doing what is expedient. There is no careful observation that actions and presuppositions matter, or that the world is made of what matters. To have meaning in your life is better than to have what you want, because you may neither know what you want, nor what you truly need. Meaning is something that comes upon you, of its own accord. You can set up the preconditions, you can follow meaning, when it manifests itself, but you cannot simply produce it, as an act of will. Meaning signifies that you are in the right place, at the right time, properly balanced between order and chaos, where everything lines up as best it can at that moment.

What is expedient works only for the moment. It’s immediate, impulsive and limited. What is meaningful, by contrast, is the organization of what would otherwise merely be expedient into a symphony of Being. Meaning is what is put forth more powerfully than mere words can express by Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” a triumphant bringing forth from the void of pattern after pattern upon beautiful pattern, every instrument playing its part, disciplined voices layered on top of that, spanning the entire breadth of human emotion from despair to exhilaration.

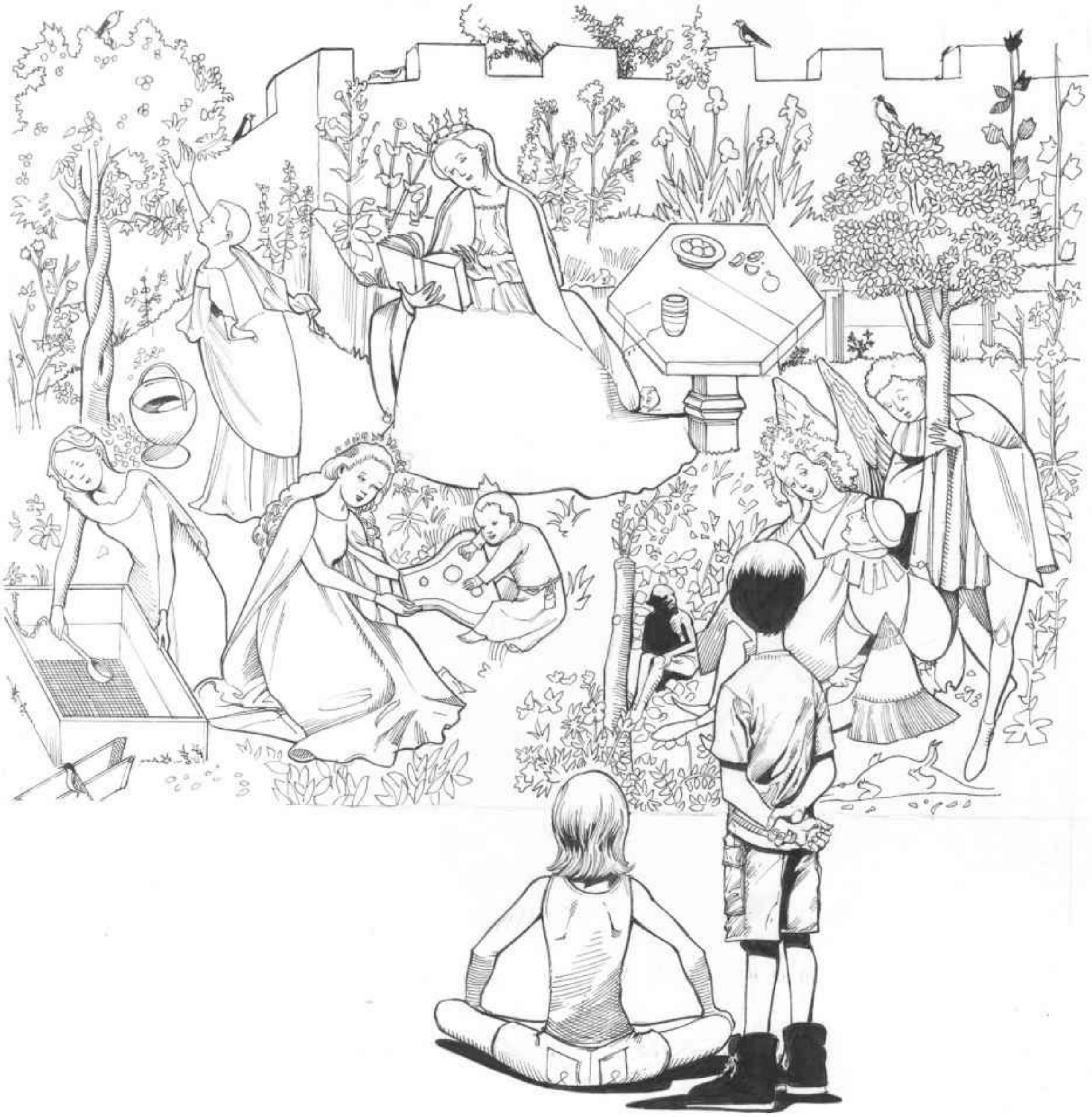
Meaning is what manifests itself when the many levels of Being arrange themselves into a perfectly functioning harmony, from atomic microcosm to cell to organ to individual to society to nature to cosmos, so that action at each level beautifully and perfectly facilitates action at all, such that past, present and future are all at once redeemed and reconciled. Meaning is what emerges beautifully and profoundly like a newly formed rosebud opening

itself out of nothingness into the light of sun and God. Meaning is the lotus striving upward through the dark lake depths through the ever-clearing water, blooming forth on the very surface, revealing within itself the Golden Buddha, himself perfectly integrated, such that the revelation of the Divine Will can make itself manifest in his every word and gesture.

Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single purpose—the glorification of a reality so that no matter how good it has suddenly become, it can get better and better and better more and more deeply forever into the future. Meaning happens when that dance has become so intense that all the horrors of the past, all the terrible struggle engaged in by all of life and all of humanity to that moment becomes a necessary and worthwhile part of the increasingly successful attempt to build something truly Mighty and Good.

Meaning is the ultimate balance between, on the one hand, the chaos of transformation and possibility and on the other, the discipline of pristine order, whose purpose is to produce out of the attendant chaos a new order that will be even more immaculate, and capable of bringing forth a still more balanced and productive chaos and order. Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any precedence over precisely that.

Do what is meaningful, not what is expedient.



RULE 8

TELL THE TRUTH—OR, AT LEAST, DON'T LIE

TRUTH IN NO-MAN'S-LAND

I trained to become a clinical psychologist at McGill University, in Montreal. While doing so, I sometimes met my classmates on the grounds of Montreal's Douglas Hospital, where we had our first direct experiences with the mentally ill. The Douglas occupies acres of land and dozens of buildings. Many are connected by underground tunnels to protect workers and patients from the interminable Montreal winters. The hospital once sheltered hundreds of long-term in-house patients. This was before anti-psychotic drugs and the large scale deinstitutionalization movements of the late sixties all but closed down the residential asylums, most often dooming the now "freed" patients to a much harder life on the streets. By the early eighties, when I first visited the grounds, all but the most seriously afflicted residents had been discharged. Those who remained were strange, much-damaged people. They clustered around the vending machines scattered throughout the hospital's tunnels. They looked as if they had been photographed by Diane Arbus or painted by Hieronymus Bosch.

One day my classmates and I were all standing in line. We were awaiting further instruction from the strait-laced German psychologist who ran the Douglas clinical training program. A long-term inpatient, fragile and vulnerable, approached one of the other students, a sheltered, conservative young woman. The patient spoke to her in a friendly, childlike manner, and asked, "Why are you all standing here? What are you doing? Can I come along with you?" My classmate turned to me and asked uncertainly, "What should I say to her?" She was taken aback, just as I was, by this request coming from someone so isolated and hurt. Neither of us wanted to say anything that might be construed as a rejection or reprimand.

We had temporarily entered a kind of no-man's-land, in which society offers no ground rules or guidance. We were new clinical students,

unprepared to be confronted on the grounds of a mental hospital by a schizophrenic patient asking a naive, friendly question about the possibility of social belonging. The natural conversational give-and-take between people attentive to contextual cues was not happening here, either. What exactly were the rules, in such a situation, far outside the boundaries of normal social interaction? What exactly were the options?

There were only two, as far as I could quickly surmise. I could tell the patient a story designed to save everyone's face, or I could answer truthfully. "We can only take eight people in our group," would have fallen into the first category, as would have, "We are just leaving the hospital now." Neither of these answers would have bruised any feelings, at least on the surface, and the presence of the status differences that divided us from her would have gone unremarked. But neither answer would have been exactly true. So, I didn't offer either.

I told the patient as simply and directly as I could that we were new students, training to be psychologists, and that she couldn't join us for that reason. The answer highlighted the distinction between her situation and ours, making the gap between us greater and more evident. The answer was harsher than a well-crafted white lie. But I already had an inkling that untruth, however well-meant, can produce unintended consequences. She looked crestfallen, and hurt, but only for a moment. Then she understood, and it was all right. That was just how it was.

I had had a strange set of experiences a few years before embarking upon my clinical training.[148] I found myself subject to some rather violent compulsions (none acted upon), and developed the conviction, in consequence, that I really knew rather little about who I was and what I was up to. So, I began paying much closer attention to what I was doing—and saying. The experience was disconcerting, to say the least. I soon divided myself into two parts: one that spoke, and one, more detached, that paid attention and judged. I soon came to realize that almost everything I said was untrue. I had motives for saying these things: I wanted to win arguments and gain status and impress people and get what I wanted. I was using language to bend and twist the world into delivering what I thought was necessary. But I was a fake. Realizing this, I started to practise only saying things that the internal voice would not object to. I started to practise telling the truth—or, at

least, not lying. I soon learned that such a skill came in very handy when I didn't know what to do. What should you do, when you don't know what to do? Tell the truth. So, that's what I did my first day at the Douglas Hospital.

Later, I had a client who was paranoid and dangerous. Working with paranoid people is challenging. They believe they have been targeted by mysterious conspiratorial forces, working malevolently behind the scenes. Paranoid people are hyper-alert and hyper-focused. They are attending to non-verbal cues with an intentness never manifest during ordinary human interactions. They make mistakes in interpretation (that's the paranoia) but they are still almost uncanny in their ability to detect mixed motives, judgment and falsehood. You have to listen very carefully and tell the truth if you are going to get a paranoid person to open up to you.

I listened carefully and spoke truthfully to my client. Now and then, he would describe blood-curdling fantasies of flaying people for revenge. I would watch how I was reacting. I paid attention to what thoughts and images emerged in the theatre of my imagination while he spoke, and I told him what I observed. I was not trying to control or direct his thoughts or actions (or mine). I was only trying to let him know as transparently as I could how what he was doing was directly affecting at least one person—me. My careful attention and frank responses did not mean at all that I remained unperturbed, let alone approved. I told him when he scared me (often), that his words and behaviour were misguided, and that he was going to get into serious trouble.

He talked to me, nonetheless, because I listened and responded honestly, even though I was not encouraging in my responses. He trusted me, despite (or, more accurately, because of) my objections. He was paranoid, not stupid. He knew his behaviour was socially unacceptable. He knew that any decent person was likely to react with horror to his insane fantasies. He trusted me and would talk to me because that's how I reacted. There was no chance of understanding him without that trust.

Trouble for him generally started in a bureaucracy, such as a bank. He would enter an institution and attempt some simple task. He was looking to open an account, or pay a bill, or fix some mistake. Now and then he encountered the kind of non-helpful person that everyone encounters now and then in such a place. That person would reject the ID he offered, or require some information that was unnecessary and difficult to obtain.

Sometimes, I suppose, the bureaucratic runaround was unavoidable—but sometimes it was unnecessarily complicated by petty misuses of bureaucratic power. My client was very attuned to such things. He was obsessed with honour. It was more important to him than safety, freedom or belonging. Following that logic (because paranoid people are impeccably logical), he could never allow himself to be demeaned, insulted or put down, even a little bit, by anyone. Water did not roll off his back. Because of his rigid and inflexible attitude, my client's actions had already been subjected to several restraining orders. Restraining orders work best, however, with the sort of person who would never require a restraining order.

"I will be your worst nightmare," was his phrase of choice, in such situations. I have wished intensely that I could say something like that, after encountering unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles, but it's generally best to let such things go. My client meant what he said, however, and sometimes he really did become someone's nightmare. He was the bad guy in *No Country for Old Men*. He was the person you meet in the wrong place, at the wrong time. If you messed with him, even accidentally, he was going to stalk you, remind you what you had done, and scare the living daylights out of you. He was no one to lie to. I told him the truth and that cooled him off.

My Landlord

I had a landlord around that time who had been president of a local biker gang. My wife, Tammy, and I lived next door to him in his parents' small apartment building. His girlfriend bore the marks of self-inflicted injuries characteristic of borderline personality disorder. She killed herself while we lived there.

Denis, large, strong, French-Canadian, with a grey beard, was a gifted amateur electrician. He had some artistic talent, too, and was supporting himself making laminated wood posters with custom neon lights. He was trying to stay sober, after being released from jail. Still, every month or so, he would disappear on a days-long bender. He was one of those men who have a miraculous capacity for alcohol; he could drink fifty or sixty beer in a two-day binge and remain standing the whole time. This may seem hard to believe, but it's true. I was doing research on familial alcoholism at the time, and it was not rare for my subjects to report their fathers' habitual

consumption of forty ounces of vodka a day. These patriarchs would buy one bottle every afternoon, Monday through Friday, and then two on Saturday, to tide them over through the Sunday liquor-store closure.

Denis had a little dog. Sometimes Tammy and I would hear Denis and the dog out in the backyard at four in the morning, during one of Denis's marathon drinking sessions, both of them howling madly at the moon. Now and then, on occasions like that, Denis would drink up every cent he had saved. Then he would show up at our apartment. We would hear a knock at night. Denis would be at the door, swaying precipitously, upright, and miraculously conscious.

He would be standing there, toaster, microwave, or poster in hand. He wanted to sell these to me so he could keep on drinking. I bought a few things like this, pretending that I was being charitable. Eventually, Tammy convinced me that I couldn't do it anymore. It made her nervous, and it was bad for Denis, whom she liked. Reasonable and even necessary as her request was, it still placed me in a tricky position.

What do you say to a severely intoxicated, violence-prone ex-biker-gang-president with patchy English when he tries to sell his microwave to you at your open door at two in the morning? This was a question even more difficult than those presented by the institutionalized patient or the paranoid flayer. But the answer was the same: the truth. But you'd bloody well better know what the truth is.

Denis knocked again soon after my wife and I had talked. He looked at me in the direct skeptical narrow-eyed manner characteristic of the tough, heavy-drinking man who is no stranger to trouble. That look means, "Prove your innocence." Weaving slightly back and forth, he asked—politely—if I might be interested in purchasing his toaster. I rid myself, to the bottom of my soul, of primate-dominance motivations and moral superiority. I told him as directly and carefully as I could that I would not. I was playing no tricks. In that moment I wasn't an educated, anglophone, fortunate, upwardly-mobile young man. He wasn't an ex-con Québécois biker with a blood alcohol level of .24. No, we were two men of good will trying to help each other out in our common struggle to do the right thing. I said that he had told me he was trying to quit drinking. I said that it would not be good for him if I provided him with more money. I said that he made Tammy, whom he respected, nervous when he came over so drunk and so late and tried to sell me things.

He glared seriously at me without speaking for about fifteen seconds. That was plenty long enough. He was watching, I knew, for any micro-expression revealing sarcasm, deceit, contempt or self-congratulation. But I had thought it through, carefully, and I had only said things I truly meant. I had chosen my words, carefully, traversing a treacherous swamp, feeling out a partially submerged stone path. Denis turned and left. Not only that, he remembered our conversation, despite his state of professional-level intoxication. He didn’t try to sell me anything again. Our relationship, which was quite good, given the great cultural gaps between us, became even more solid.

Taking the easy way out or telling the truth—those are not merely two different choices. They are different pathways through life. They are utterly different ways of existing.

Manipulate the World

You can use words to manipulate the world into delivering what you want. This is what it means to “act politically.” This is spin. It’s the specialty of unscrupulous marketers, salesmen, advertisers, pickup artists, slogan-possessed utopians and psychopaths. It’s the speech people engage in when they attempt to influence and manipulate others. It’s what university students do when they write an essay to please the professor, instead of articulating and clarifying their own ideas. It’s what everyone does when they want something, and decide to falsify themselves to please and flatter. It’s scheming and sloganeering and propaganda.

To conduct life like this is to become possessed by some ill-formed desire, and then to craft speech and action in a manner that appears likely, rationally, to bring about that end. Typical calculated ends might include “to impose my ideological beliefs,” “to prove that I am (or was) right,” “to appear competent,” “to ratchet myself up the dominance hierarchy,” “to avoid responsibility” (or its twin, “to garner credit for others’ actions”), “to be promoted,” “to attract the lion’s share of attention,” “to ensure that everyone likes me,” “to garner the benefits of martyrdom,” “to justify my cynicism,” “to rationalize my antisocial outlook,” “to minimize immediate conflict,” “to maintain my naïveté,” “to capitalize on my vulnerability,” “to always appear as the sainted one,” or (this one is particularly evil) “to ensure that it is always my unloved child’s fault.” These are all examples of what Sigmund

Freud's compatriot, the lesser-known Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler, called "life-lies."[149]

Someone living a life-lie is attempting to manipulate reality with perception, thought and action, so that only some narrowly desired and pre-defined outcome is allowed to exist. A life lived in this manner is based, consciously or unconsciously, on two premises. The first is that current knowledge is sufficient to define what is good, unquestioningly, far into the future. The second is that reality would be unbearable if left to its own devices. The first presumption is philosophically unjustifiable. What you are currently aiming at might not be worth attaining, just as what you are currently doing might be an error. The second is even worse. It is valid only if reality is intrinsically intolerable and, simultaneously, something that can be successfully manipulated and distorted. Such speaking and thinking requires the arrogance and certainty that the English poet John Milton's genius identified with Satan, God's highest angel gone most spectacularly wrong. The faculty of rationality inclines dangerously to pride: *all I know is all that needs to be known*. Pride falls in love with its own creations, and tries to make them absolute.

I have seen people define their utopia and then bend their lives into knots trying to make it reality. A left-leaning student adopts a trendy, anti-authority stance and spends the next twenty years working resentfully to topple the windmills of his imagination. An eighteen-year-old decides, arbitrarily, that she wants to retire at fifty-two. She works for three decades to make that happen, failing to notice that she made that decision when she was little more than a child. What did she know about her fifty-two-year-old self, when still a teenager? Even now, many years later, she has only the vaguest, lowest-resolution idea of her post-work Eden. She refuses to notice. What did her life mean, if that initial goal was wrong? She's afraid of opening Pandora's box, where all the troubles of the world reside. But hope is in there, too. Instead, she warps her life to fit the fantasies of a sheltered adolescent.

A naively formulated goal transmutes, with time, into the sinister form of the life-lie. One forty-something client told me his vision, formulated by his younger self: "I see myself retired, sitting on a tropical beach, drinking margaritas in the sunshine." That's not a plan. That's a travel poster. After eight margaritas, you're fit only to await the hangover. After three weeks of

margarita-filled days, if you have any sense, you're bored stiff and self-disgusted. In a year, or less, you're pathetic. It's just not a sustainable approach to later life. This kind of oversimplification and falsification is particularly typical of ideologues. They adopt a single axiom: government is bad, immigration is bad, capitalism is bad, patriarchy is bad. Then they filter and screen their experiences and insist ever more narrowly that everything can be explained by that axiom. They believe, narcissistically, underneath all that bad theory, that the world could be put right, if only they held the controls.

There is another fundamental problem, too, with the life-lie, particularly when it is based on avoidance. A sin of commission occurs when you do something you know to be wrong. A sin of omission occurs when you let something bad happen when you could do something to stop it. The former is regarded, classically, as more serious than the latter—than avoidance. I'm not so sure.

Consider the person who insists that everything is right in her life. She avoids conflict, and smiles, and does what she is asked to do. She finds a niche and hides in it. She does not question authority or put her own ideas forward, and does not complain when mistreated. She strives for invisibility, like a fish in the centre of a swarming school. But a secret unrest gnaws at her heart. She is still suffering, because life is suffering. She is lonesome and isolated and unfulfilled. But her obedience and self-obliteration eliminate all the meaning from her life. She has become nothing but a slave, a tool for others to exploit. She does not get what she wants, or needs, because doing so would mean speaking her mind. So, there is nothing of value in her existence to counter-balance life's troubles. And that makes her sick.

It might be the noisy troublemakers who disappear, first, when the institution you serve falters and shrinks. But it's the invisible who will be sacrificed next. Someone hiding is not someone vital. Vitality requires original contribution. Hiding also does not save the conforming and conventional from disease, insanity, death and taxes. And hiding from others also means suppressing and hiding the potentialities of the unrealized self. And that's the problem.

If you will not reveal yourself to others, you cannot reveal yourself to yourself. That does not only mean that you suppress who you are, although it also means that. It means that so much of what you could be will never be

forced by necessity to come forward. This is a biological truth, as well as a conceptual truth. When you explore boldly, when you voluntarily confront the unknown, you gather information and build your renewed self out of that information. That is the conceptual element. However, researchers have recently discovered that new genes in the central nervous system turn themselves on when an organism is placed (or places itself) in a new situation. These genes code for new proteins. These proteins are the building blocks for new structures in the brain. This means that a lot of you is still nascent, in the most physical of senses, and will not be called forth by stasis. You have to say something, go somewhere and do things to get turned on. And, if not … you remain incomplete, and life is too hard for anyone incomplete.

If you say no to your boss, or your spouse, or your mother, when it needs to be said, then you transform yourself into someone who *can* say no when it needs to be said. If you say yes when no needs to be said, however, you transform yourself into someone who can only say yes, even when it is very clearly time to say no. If you ever wonder how perfectly ordinary, decent people could find themselves doing the terrible things the gulag camp guards did, you now have your answer. By the time *no* seriously needed to be said, there was no one left capable of saying it.

If you betray yourself, if you say untrue things, if you act out a lie, you weaken your character. If you have a weak character, then adversity will mow you down when it appears, as it will, inevitably. You will hide, but there will be no place left to hide. And then you will find yourself doing terrible things.

Only the most cynical, hopeless philosophy insists that reality could be improved through falsification. Such a philosophy judges Being and becoming alike, and deems them flawed. It denounces truth as insufficient and the honest man as deluded. It is a philosophy that both brings about and then justifies the endemic corruption of the world.

It is not vision as such, and not a plan devised to achieve a vision, that is at fault under such circumstances. A vision of the future, the desirable future, is necessary. Such a vision links action taken now with important, long-term, foundational values. It lends actions in the present significance and importance. It provides a frame limiting uncertainty and anxiety.

It's not vision. It is instead willful blindness. It's the worst sort of lie. It's

subtle. It avails itself of easy rationalizations. Willful blindness is the refusal to know something that could be known. It's refusal to admit that the knocking sound means someone at the door. It's refusal to acknowledge the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, the elephant under the carpet, the skeleton in the closet. It's refusal to admit to error while pursuing the plan. Every game has rules. Some of the most important rules are implicit. You accept them merely by deciding to play the game. The first of these rules is that the game is important. If it wasn't important, you wouldn't be playing it. Playing a game defines it as important. The second is that moves undertaken during the game are valid if they help you win. If you make a move and it isn't helping you win, then, by definition, it's a bad move. You need to try something different. You remember the old joke: insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results.

If you're lucky, and you fail, and you try something new, you move ahead. If that doesn't work, you try something different again. A minor modification will suffice in fortunate circumstances. It is therefore prudent to begin with small changes, and see if they help. Sometimes, however, the entire hierarchy of values is faulty, and the whole edifice has to be abandoned. The whole game must be changed. That's a revolution, with all the chaos and terror of a revolution. It's not something to be engaged in lightly, but it's sometimes necessary. Error necessitates sacrifice to correct it, and serious error necessitates serious sacrifice. To accept the truth means to sacrifice—and if you have rejected the truth for a long time, then you've run up a dangerously large sacrificial debt. Forest fires burn out deadwood and return trapped elements to the soil. Sometimes, however, fires are suppressed, artificially. That does not stop the deadwood from accumulating. Sooner or later, a fire will start. When it does, it will burn so hot that everything will be destroyed—even the soil in which the forest grows.

The prideful, rational mind, comfortable with its certainty, enamoured of its own brilliance, is easily tempted to ignore error, and to sweep dirt under the rug. Literary, existential philosophers, beginning with Søren Kierkegaard, conceived of this mode of Being as "inauthentic." An inauthentic person continues to perceive and act in ways his own experience has demonstrated false. He does not speak with his own voice.

"Did what I want happen? No. Then my aim or my methods were wrong. I still have something to learn." That is the voice of authenticity.

“Did what I want happen? No. Then the world is unfair. People are jealous, and too stupid to understand. It is the fault of something or someone else.” That is the voice of inauthenticity. It is not too far from there to “they should be stopped” or “they must be hurt” or “they must be destroyed.” Whenever you hear about something incomprehensibly brutal, such ideas have manifested themselves.

There is no blaming any of this on unconsciousness, either, or repression. When the individual lies, he knows it. He may blind himself to the consequences of his actions. He may fail to analyze and articulate his past, so that he does not understand. He may even forget that he lied and so be unconscious of that fact. But he was conscious, in the present, during the commission of each error, and the omission of each responsibility. At that moment, he knew what he was up to. And the sins of the inauthentic individual compound and corrupt the state.

Someone power-hungry makes a new rule at your workplace. It’s unnecessary. It’s counterproductive. It’s an irritant. It removes some of the pleasure and meaning from your work. But you tell yourself it’s all right. It’s not worth complaining about. Then it happens again. You’ve already trained yourself to allow such things, by failing to react the first time. You’re a little less courageous. Your opponent, unopposed, is a little bit stronger. The institution is a little bit more corrupt. The process of bureaucratic stagnation and oppression is underway, and you’ve contributed, by pretending that it was OK. Why not complain? Why not take a stand? If you do, other people, equally afraid to speak up, may come to your defence. And if not—maybe it’s time for a revolution. Maybe you should find a job somewhere else, where your soul is less in danger from corruption.

For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36)

One of the major contributions of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s masterwork, *The Gulag Archipelago*, was his analysis of the direct causal relationship between the pathology of the Soviet prison-work-camp dependent state (where millions suffered and died) and the almost universal proclivity of the Soviet citizen to falsify his own day-to-day personal experience, deny his own state-induced suffering, and thereby prop up the dictates of the rational, ideology-possessed communist system. It was this bad faith, this denial, that in Solzhenitsyn’s opinion aided and abetted that great paranoid mass-

murderer, Joseph Stalin, in his crimes. Solzhenitsyn wrote the truth, his truth, hard-learned through his own experiences in the camps, exposing the lies of the Soviet state. No educated person dared defend that ideology again after Solzhenitsyn published *The Gulag Archipelago*. No one could ever say again, “What Stalin did, that was not true communism.”

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist and Nazi concentration camp survivor who wrote the classic *Man’s Search for Meaning*, drew a similar social-psychological conclusion: *deceitful, inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism.* Sigmund Freud, for his part, analogously believed that “repression” contributed in a non-trivial manner to the development of mental illness (and the difference between repression of truth and a lie is a matter of degree, not kind). Alfred Adler knew it was lies that bred sickness. C.G. Jung knew that moral problems plagued his patients, and that such problems were caused by untruth. All these thinkers, all centrally concerned with pathology both individual and cultural, came to the same conclusion: lies warp the structure of Being. Untruth corrupts the soul and the state alike, and one form of corruption feeds the other.

I have repeatedly observed the transformation of mere existential misery into outright hell by betrayal and deceit. The barely manageable crisis of a parent’s terminal illness can be turned, for example, into something awful beyond description by the unseemly and petty squabbling of the sufferer’s adult children. Obsessed by the unresolved past, they gather like ghouls around the deathbed, forcing tragedy into an unholy dalliance with cowardice and resentment.

The inability of a son to thrive independently is exploited by a mother bent on shielding her child from all disappointment and pain. He never leaves, and she is never lonely. It’s an evil conspiracy, forged slowly, as the pathology unfolds, by thousands of knowing winks and nods. She plays the martyr, doomed to support her son, and garners nourishing sympathy, like a vampire, from supporting friends. He broods in his basement, imagining himself oppressed. He fantasizes with delight about the havoc he might wreak on the world that rejected him for his cowardice, awkwardness and inability. And sometimes he wreaks precisely that havoc. And everyone asks, “Why?” They could know, but refuse to.

Even well-lived lives can, of course, be warped and hurt and twisted by illness and infirmity and uncontrollable catastrophe. Depression, bipolar

disorder and schizophrenia, like cancer, all involve biological factors beyond the individual's immediate control. The difficulties intrinsic to life itself are sufficient to weaken and overwhelm each of us, pushing us beyond our limits, breaking us at our weakest point. Not even the best-lived life provides an absolute defence against vulnerability. But the family that fights in the ruins of their earthquake-devastated dwelling place is much less likely to rebuild than the family made strong by mutual trust and devotion. Any natural weakness or existential challenge, no matter how minor, can be magnified into a serious crisis with enough deceit in the individual, family or culture.

The honest human spirit may continually fail in its attempts to bring about Paradise on Earth. It may manage, however, to reduce the suffering attendant on existence to bearable levels. The tragedy of Being is the consequence of our limitations and the vulnerability defining human experience. It may even be the price we pay for Being itself—since existence must be limited, to be at all.

I have seen a husband adapt honestly and courageously while his wife descended into terminal dementia. He made the necessary adjustments, step by step. He accepted help when he needed it. He refused to deny her sad deterioration and in that manner adapted gracefully to it. I saw the family of that same woman come together in a supporting and sustaining manner as she lay dying, and gain newfound connections with each other—brother, sisters, grandchildren and father—as partial but genuine compensation for their loss. I have seen my teenage daughter live through the destruction of her hip and her ankle and survive two years of continual, intense pain and emerge with her spirit intact. I watched her younger brother voluntarily and without resentment sacrifice many opportunities for friendship and social engagement to stand by her and us while she suffered. With love, encouragement, and character intact, a human being can be resilient beyond imagining. What cannot be borne, however, is the absolute ruin produced by tragedy and deception.

The capacity of the rational mind to deceive, manipulate, scheme, trick, falsify, minimize, mislead, betray, prevaricate, deny, omit, rationalize, bias, exaggerate and obscure is so endless, so remarkable, that centuries of pre-scientific thought, concentrating on clarifying the nature of moral endeavour, regarded it as positively demonic. This is not because of rationality itself, as a

process. That process can produce clarity and progress. It is because rationality is subject to the single worst temptation—to raise what it knows now to the status of an absolute.

We can turn to the great poet John Milton, once again, to clarify just what this means. Over thousands of years of history, the Western world wrapped a dream-like fantasy about the nature of evil around its central religious core. That fantasy had a protagonist, an adversarial personality, absolutely dedicated to the corruption of Being. Milton took it upon himself to organize, dramatize and articulate the essence of this collective dream, and gave it life, in the figure of Satan—Lucifer, the "light bearer." He writes of Lucifer's primal temptation, and its immediate consequences:[150]

> *He trusted to have equaled the most High,*
> *If he opposed; and with ambitious aim*
> *Against the Throne and Monarchy of God*
> *Raised impious War in Heaven and Battel proud*
> *With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power*
> *Hurled headlong flaming from the Ethereal Sky*
> *With hideous ruin and combustion down*
> *To bottomless perdition, there to dwell*
> *In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire …*

Lucifer, in Milton's eyes—the spirit of reason—was the most wondrous angel brought forth from the void by God. This can be read psychologically. Reason is something alive. It lives in all of us. It's older than any of us. It's best understood as a personality, not a faculty. It has its aims, and its temptations, and its weaknesses. It flies higher and sees farther than any other spirit. But reason falls in love with itself, and worse. It falls in love with its own productions. It elevates them, and worships them as absolutes. Lucifer is, therefore, the spirit of totalitarianism. He is flung from Heaven into Hell because such elevation, such rebellion against the Highest and Incomprehensible, inevitably produces Hell.

To say it again: it is the greatest temptation of the rational faculty to glorify its own capacity and its own productions and to claim that in the face of its theories nothing transcendent or outside its domain need exist. This means that all important facts have been discovered. This means that nothing important remains unknown. But most importantly, it means denial of the necessity for courageous individual confrontation with Being. What is going to save you? The totalitarian says, in essence, "You must rely on faith in what

you already know.” But that is not what saves. *What saves is the willingness to learn from what you don’t know.* That is faith in the possibility of human transformation. That is faith in the sacrifice of the current self for the self that could be. The totalitarian denies the necessity for the individual to take ultimate responsibility for Being.

That denial is the meaning of rebellion against “the most High.” That is what *totalitarian* means: Everything that needs to be discovered has been discovered. Everything will unfold precisely as planned. All problems will vanish, forever, once the perfect system is accepted. Milton’s great poem was a prophecy. As rationality rose ascendant from the ashes of Christianity, the great threat of total systems accompanied it. Communism, in particular, was attractive not so much to oppressed workers, its hypothetical beneficiaries, but to intellectuals—to those whose arrogant pride in intellect assured them they were always right. But the promised utopia never emerged. Instead humanity experienced the inferno of Stalinist Russia and Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia, and the citizens of those states were required to betray their own experience, turn against their fellow citizens, and die in the tens of millions.

There is an old Soviet joke. An American dies and goes to hell. Satan himself shows him around. They pass a large cauldron. The American peers in. It’s full of suffering souls, burning in hot pitch. As they struggle to leave the pot, low-ranking devils, sitting on the rim, pitchfork them back in. The American is properly shocked. Satan says, “That’s where we put sinful Englishmen.” The tour continues. Soon the duo approaches a second cauldron. It’s slightly larger, and slightly hotter. The American peers in. It is also full of suffering souls, all wearing berets. Devils are pitchforking would-be escapees back into this cauldron, as well. “That’s where we put sinful Frenchmen,” Satan says. In the distance is a third cauldron. It’s much bigger, and is glowing, white hot. The American can barely get near it. Nonetheless, at Satan’s insistence, he approaches it and peers in. It is absolutely packed with souls, barely visible, under the surface of the boiling liquid. Now and then, however, one clambers out of the pitch and desperately reaches for the rim. Oddly, there are no devils sitting on the edge of this giant pot, but the clamberer disappears back under the surface anyway. The American asks, “Why are there no demons here to keep everyone from escaping?” Satan

replies, “This is where we put the Russians. If one tries to escape, the others pull him back in.”

Milton believed that stubborn refusal to change in the face of error not only meant ejection from heaven, and subsequent degeneration into an ever-deepening hell, but the rejection of redemption itself. Satan knows full well that even if he was willing to seek reconciliation, and God willing to grant it, he would only rebel again, because he will not change. Perhaps it is this prideful stubbornness that constitutes the mysterious unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost:

> *… Farewell happy Fields*
> *Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail*
> *Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell*
> *Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings*
> *A mind not to be changed by Place or Time.*[151]

This is no afterlife fantasy. This is no perverse realm of post-existence torture for political enemies. This is an abstract idea, and abstractions are often more real than what they represent. The idea that hell exists in some metaphysical manner is not only ancient, and pervasive; it’s true. Hell is eternal. It has always existed. It exists now. It’s the most barren, hopeless and malevolent subdivision of the underworld of chaos, where disappointed and resentful people forever dwell.

> *The mind is its own place, and in itself*
> *Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.*[152]
> …
> *Here we may reign secure, and in my choice*
> *To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:*
> *Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.*[153]

Those who have lied enough, in word and action, live there, in hell—now. Take a walk down any busy urban street. Keep your eyes open and pay attention. You will see people who are there, now. These are the people to whom you instinctively give a wide berth. These are the people who are immediately angered if you direct your gaze toward them, although sometimes they will instead turn away in shame. I saw a horribly damaged street alcoholic do exactly that in the presence of my young daughter. He wanted above all to avoid seeing his degraded state incontrovertibly reflected in her eyes.

It is deceit that makes people miserable beyond what they can bear. It is deceit that fills human souls with resentment and vengefulness. It is deceit that produces the terrible suffering of mankind: the death camps of the Nazis; the torture chambers and genocides of Stalin and that even greater monster, Mao. It was deceit that killed hundreds of millions of people in the twentieth century. It was deceit that almost doomed civilization itself. It is deceit that still threatens us, most profoundly, today.

The Truth, Instead

What happens if, instead, we decide to stop lying? What does this even mean? We are limited in our knowledge, after all. We must make decisions, here and now, even though the best means and the best goals can never be discerned with certainty. An aim, an ambition, provides the structure necessary for action. An aim provides a destination, a point of contrast against the present, and a framework, within which all things can be evaluated. An aim defines progress and makes such progress exciting. An aim reduces anxiety, because if you have no aim everything can mean anything or nothing, and neither of those two options makes for a tranquil spirit. Thus, we have to think, and plan, and limit, and posit, in order to live at all. How then to envision the future, and establish our direction, without falling prey to the temptation of totalitarian certainty?

Some reliance on tradition can help us establish our aims. It is reasonable to do what other people have always done, unless we have a very good reason not to. It is reasonable to become educated and work and find love and have a family. That is how culture maintains itself. But it is necessary to aim at your target, however traditional, with your eyes wide open. You have a direction, but it might be wrong. You have a plan, but it might be ill-formed. You may have been led astray by your own ignorance—and, worse, by your own unrevealed corruption. You must make friends, therefore, with what you don’t know, instead of what you know. You must remain awake to catch yourself in the act. You must remove the beam in your own eye, before you concern yourself with the mote in your brother’s. And in this way, you strengthen your own spirit, so it can tolerate the burden of existence, and you rejuvenate the state.

The ancient Egyptians had already figured this out thousands of years ago, although their knowledge remained embodied in dramatic form.[154] They worshipped Osiris, mythological founder of the state and the god of tradition. Osiris, however, was vulnerable to overthrow and banishment to the underworld by Set, his evil, scheming brother. The Egyptians represented in story the fact that social organizations ossify with time, and tend towards willful blindness. Osiris would not see his brother's true character, even though he could have. Set waits and, at an opportune moment, attacks. He hacks Osiris into pieces, and scatters the divine remains through the kingdom. He sends his brother's spirit to the underworld. He makes it very difficult for Osiris to pull himself back together.

Fortunately, the great king did not have to deal with Set on his own. The Egyptians also worshipped Horus, the son of Osiris. Horus took the twin forms of a falcon, the most visually acute of all creatures, and the still-famous hieroglyphic single Egyptian eye (as alluded to in Rule 7). Osiris is tradition, aged and willfully blind. Horus, his son, could and would, by contrast, see. Horus was the god of attention. That is not the same as rationality. Because he paid attention, Horus could perceive and triumph against the evils of Set, his uncle, albeit at great cost. When Horus confronts Set, they have a terrible battle. Before Set's defeat and banishment from the kingdom, he tears out one of his nephew's eyes. But the eventually victorious Horus takes back the eye. Then he does something truly unexpected: *he journeys voluntarily to the underworld and gives the eye to his father.*

What does this mean? First, that the encounter with malevolence and evil is of sufficient terror to damage even the vision of a god; second, *that the attentive son can restore the vision of his father*. Culture is always in a near-dead state, even though it was established by the spirit of great people in the past. But the present is not the past. The wisdom of the past thus deteriorates, or becomes outdated, in proportion to the genuine difference between the conditions of the present and the past. That is a mere consequence of the passage of time, and the change that passage inevitably brings. But it is also the case that culture and its wisdom is additionally vulnerable to corruption—to voluntary, willful blindness and Mephistophelean intrigue. Thus, the inevitable functional decline of the institutions granted to us by our ancestors is sped along by our misbehavior—our missing of the mark—in the present.

It is our responsibility to see what is before our eyes, courageously, and to learn from it, even if it seems horrible—even if the horror of seeing it damages our consciousness, and half-blinds us. The act of seeing is particularly important when it challenges what we know and rely on, upsetting and destabilizing us. It is the act of seeing that informs the individual and updates the state. It was for this reason that Nietzsche said that a man's worth was determined by how much truth he could tolerate. You are by no means only what you already know. You are also all that which you could know, if you only would. Thus, you should never sacrifice what you could be for what you are. You should never give up the better that resides within for the security you already have—and certainly not when you have already caught a glimpse, an undeniable glimpse, of something beyond.

In the Christian tradition, Christ is identified with the Logos. The Logos is the Word of God. That Word transformed chaos into order at the beginning of time. In His human form, Christ sacrificed himself voluntarily to the truth, to the good, to God. In consequence, He died and was reborn. The Word that produces order from Chaos sacrifices everything, even itself, to God. That single sentence, wise beyond comprehension, sums up Christianity. Every bit of learning is a little death. Every bit of new information challenges a previous conception, forcing it to dissolve into chaos before it can be reborn as something better. Sometimes such deaths virtually destroy us. In such cases, we might never recover or, if we do, we change a lot. A good friend of mine discovered that his wife of decades was having an affair. He didn't see it coming. It plunged him into a deep depression. He descended into the underworld. He told me, at one point, "I always thought that people who were depressed should just shake it off. I didn't have any idea what I was talking about." Eventually, he returned from the depths. In many ways, he's a new man—and, perhaps, a wiser and better man. He lost forty pounds. He ran a marathon. He travelled to Africa and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. He chose rebirth over descent into Hell.

Set your ambitions, even if you are uncertain about what they should be. The better ambitions have to do with the development of character and ability, rather than status and power. Status you can lose. You carry character with you wherever you go, and it allows you to prevail against adversity. Knowing this, tie a rope to a boulder. Pick up the great stone, heave it in front of you, and pull yourself towards it. Watch and observe while you move

forward. Articulate your experience as clearly and carefully to yourself and others as you possibly can. In this manner, you will learn to proceed more effectively and efficiently towards your goal. And, while you are doing this, do not lie. Especially to yourself.

If you pay attention to what you do and say, you can learn to feel a state of internal division and weakness when you are misbehaving and misspeaking. It's an embodied sensation, not a thought. I experience an internal sensation of sinking and division, rather than solidity and strength, when I am incautious with my acts and words. It seems to be centred in my solar plexus, where a large knot of nervous tissue resides. I learned to recognize when I was lying, in fact, by noticing this sinking and division, and then inferring the presence of a lie. It often took me a long time to ferret out the deception. Sometimes I was using words for appearance. Sometimes I was trying to disguise my own true ignorance of the topic at hand. Sometimes I was using the words of others to avoid the responsibility of thinking for myself.

If you pay attention, when you are seeking something, you will move towards your goal. More importantly, however, you will acquire the information that allows your goal itself to transform. A totalitarian never asks, "What if my current ambition is in error?" He treats it, instead, as the Absolute. It becomes his God, for all intents and purposes. It constitutes his highest value. It regulates his emotions and motivational states, and determines his thoughts. All people serve their ambition. In that matter, there are no atheists. There are only people who know, and don't know, what God they serve.

If you bend everything totally, blindly and willfully towards the attainment of a goal, and only that goal, you will never be able to discover if another goal would serve you, and the world, better. It is this that you sacrifice if you do not tell the truth. If, instead, you tell the truth, your values transform as you progress. If you allow yourself to be informed by the reality manifesting itself, as you struggle forward, your notions of what is important will change. You will reorient yourself, sometimes gradually, and sometimes suddenly and radically.

Imagine: you go to engineering school, because that is what your parents desire—but it is not what you want. Working at cross-purposes to your own wishes, you will find yourself unmotivated, and failing. You will struggle to concentrate and discipline yourself, but it will not work. Your soul will reject

the tyranny of your will (how else could that be said?). Why are you complying? You may not want to disappoint your parents (although if you fail you will do exactly that). You may lack the courage for the conflict necessary to free yourself. You may not want to sacrifice your childish belief in parental omniscience, wishing devoutly to continue believing that there is someone who knows you better than you know yourself, and who also knows all about the world. You want to be shielded in this manner from the stark existential aloneness of individual Being and its attendant responsibility. This is all very common and understandable. But you suffer because you are truly not meant to be an engineer.

One day you have had enough. You drop out. You disappoint your parents. You learn to live with that. You consult only yourself, even though that means you must rely on your own decisions. You take a philosophy degree. You accept the burden of your own mistakes. You become your own person. By rejecting your father's vision, you develop your own. And then, as your parents age, you've become adult enough to be there for them, when they come to need you. They win, too. But both victories had to be purchased at the cost of the conflict engendered by your truth. As Matthew 10:34 has it, citing Christ—emphasizing the role of the spoken Truth: "Think not that I have come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

As you continue to live in accordance with the truth, as it reveals itself to you, you will have to accept and deal with the conflicts that mode of Being will generate. If you do so, you will continue to mature and become more responsible, in small ways (don't underestimate their importance) and in large. You will ever more closely approach your newer and more wisely formulated goals, and become even wiser in their formulation, when you discover and rectify your inevitable errors. Your conception of what is important will become more and more appropriate, as you incorporate the wisdom of your experience. You will quit wildly oscillating and walk ever more directly towards the good—a good you could never have comprehended if you had insisted despite all evidence that you were right, absolutely right, at the beginning.

If existence is good, then the clearest and cleanest and most correct relationship with it is also good. If existence is not good, by contrast, you're lost. Nothing will save you—certainly not the petty rebellions, murky thinking and obscurantist blindness that constitute deceit. Is existence good?

You have to take a terrible risk to find out. Live in truth, or live in deceit, face the consequences, and draw your conclusions.

This is the "act of faith" whose necessity was insisted upon by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. You cannot know ahead of time. Even a good example is insufficient for proof, given the differences between individuals. The success of a good example can always be attributed to luck. Thus, you have to risk your particular, individual life to find out. It is this risk that the ancients described as the sacrifice of personal will to the will of God. It is not an act of submission (at least as submission is currently understood). It is an act of courage. It is faith that the wind will blow your ship to a new and better port. It is the faith that Being can be corrected by becoming. It is the spirit of exploration itself.

Perhaps it is better to conceptualize it this way: Everyone needs a concrete, specific goal—an ambition, and a purpose—to limit chaos and make intelligible sense of his or her life. But all such concrete goals can and should be subordinated to what might be considered a meta-goal, which is a way of approaching and formulating goals themselves. The meta-goal could be "live in truth." This means, "Act diligently towards some well-articulated, defined and temporary end. Make your criteria for failure and success timely and clear, at least for yourself (and even better if others can understand what you are doing and evaluate it with you). While doing so, however, allow the world and your spirit to unfold as they will, while you act out and articulate the truth." This is both pragmatic ambition and the most courageous of faiths.

Life is suffering. The Buddha stated that, explicitly. Christians portray the same sentiment imagistically, with the divine crucifix. The Jewish faith is saturated with its remembrance. The equivalence of life and limitation is the primary and unavoidable fact of existence. The vulnerability of our Being renders us susceptible to the pains of social judgement and contempt and the inevitable breakdown of our bodies. But even all those ways of suffering, terrible as they are, are not sufficient to corrupt the world, to transform it into Hell, the way the Nazis and the Maoists and the Stalinists corrupted the world and turned it into Hell. For that, as Hitler stated so clearly, you need the lie:[155]

> [I]n the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more

> readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Even though the facts which prove this to be so may be brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some other explanation.

For the big lie, you first need the little lie. The little lie is, metaphorically speaking, the bait used by the Father of Lies to hook his victims. The human capacity for imagination makes us capable of dreaming up and creating alternative worlds. This is the ultimate source of our creativity. With that singular capacity, however, comes the counterpart, the opposite side of the coin: we can deceive ourselves and others into believing and acting as if things are other than we know they are.

And why not lie? Why not twist and distort things to obtain a small gain, or to smooth things over, or to keep the peace, or to avoid hurt feelings? Reality has its terrible aspect: do we really need to confront its snake-headed face in every moment of our waking consciousness, and at every turn in our lives? Why not turn away, at least, when looking is simply too painful?

The reason is simple. *Things fall apart.* What worked yesterday will not necessarily work today. We have inherited the great machinery of state and culture from our forefathers, but they are dead, and cannot deal with the changes of the day. *The living can.* We can open our eyes and modify what we have where necessary and keep the machinery running smoothly. Or we can pretend that everything is alright, fail to make the necessary repairs, and then curse fate when nothing goes our way.

Things fall apart: this is one of the great discoveries of humanity. And we speed the natural deterioration of great things through blindness, inaction and deceit. Without attention, culture degenerates and dies, and evil prevails.

What you see of a lie when you act it out (and most lies are acted out, rather than told) is very little of what it actually is. A lie is connected to everything else. It produces the same effect on the world that a single drop of sewage produces in even the largest crystal magnum of champagne. It is something best considered live and growing.

When the lies get big enough, the whole world spoils. But if you look close enough, the biggest of lies is composed of smaller lies, and those are composed of still smaller lies—and the smallest of lies is where the big lie starts. It is not the mere misstatement of fact. It is instead an act that has the

aspect of the most serious conspiracy ever to possess the race of man. Its seeming innocuousness, its trivial meanness, the feeble arrogance that gives rise to it, the apparently trivial circumventing of responsibility that it aims at—these all work effectively to camouflage its true nature, its genuine dangerousness, and its equivalence with the great acts of evil that man perpetrates and often enjoys. Lies corrupt the world. Worse, that is their intent.

First, a little lie; then, several little lies to prop it up. After that, distorted thinking to avoid the shame that those lies produce, then a few more lies to cover up the consequences of the distorted thinking. Then, most terribly, the transformation of those now necessary lies through practice into automatized, specialized, structural, neurologically instantiated "unconscious" belief and action. Then the sickening of experience itself as action predicated on falsehood fails to produce the results intended. If you don't believe in brick walls, you will still be injured when you run headlong into one. Then you will curse reality itself for producing the wall.

After that comes the arrogance and sense of superiority that inevitably accompanies the production of successful lies (*hypothetically* successful lies—and that is one of the greatest dangers: apparently everyone is fooled, so everyone is stupid, except me. Everyone is stupid and fooled, *by* me—so I can get away with whatever I want). Finally, there is the proposition: "Being itself is susceptible to my manipulations. Thus, it deserves no respect."

That's things falling apart, like Osiris, severed into pieces. That's the structure of the person or the state disintegrating under the influence of a malign force. That's the chaos of the underworld emerging, like a flood, to subsume familiar ground. But it's not yet Hell.

Hell comes later. Hell comes when lies have destroyed the relationship between individual or state and reality itself. Things fall apart. Life degenerates. Everything becomes frustration and disappointment. Hope consistently betrays. The deceitful individual desperately gestures at sacrifice, like Cain, but fails to please God. Then the drama enters its final act.

Tortured by constant failure, the individual becomes bitter. Disappointment and failure amalgamate, and produce a fantasy: *the world is bent on my personal suffering, my particular undoing, my destruction.* I need, I deserve, I must have—my revenge. That's the gateway to Hell. That's when the underworld, a terrifying and unfamiliar place, becomes misery itself.

At the beginning of time, according to the great Western tradition, the Word of God transformed chaos into Being through the act of speech. It is axiomatic, within that tradition, that man and woman alike are made in the image of that God. We also transform chaos into Being, through speech. We transform the manifold possibilities of the future into the actualities of past and present.

To tell the truth is to bring the most habitable reality into Being. Truth builds edifices that can stand a thousand years. Truth feeds and clothes the poor, and makes nations wealthy and safe. Truth reduces the terrible complexity of a man to the simplicity of his word, so that he can become a partner, rather than an enemy. Truth makes the past truly past, and makes the best use of the future's possibilities. Truth is the ultimate, inexhaustible natural resource. It's the light in the darkness.

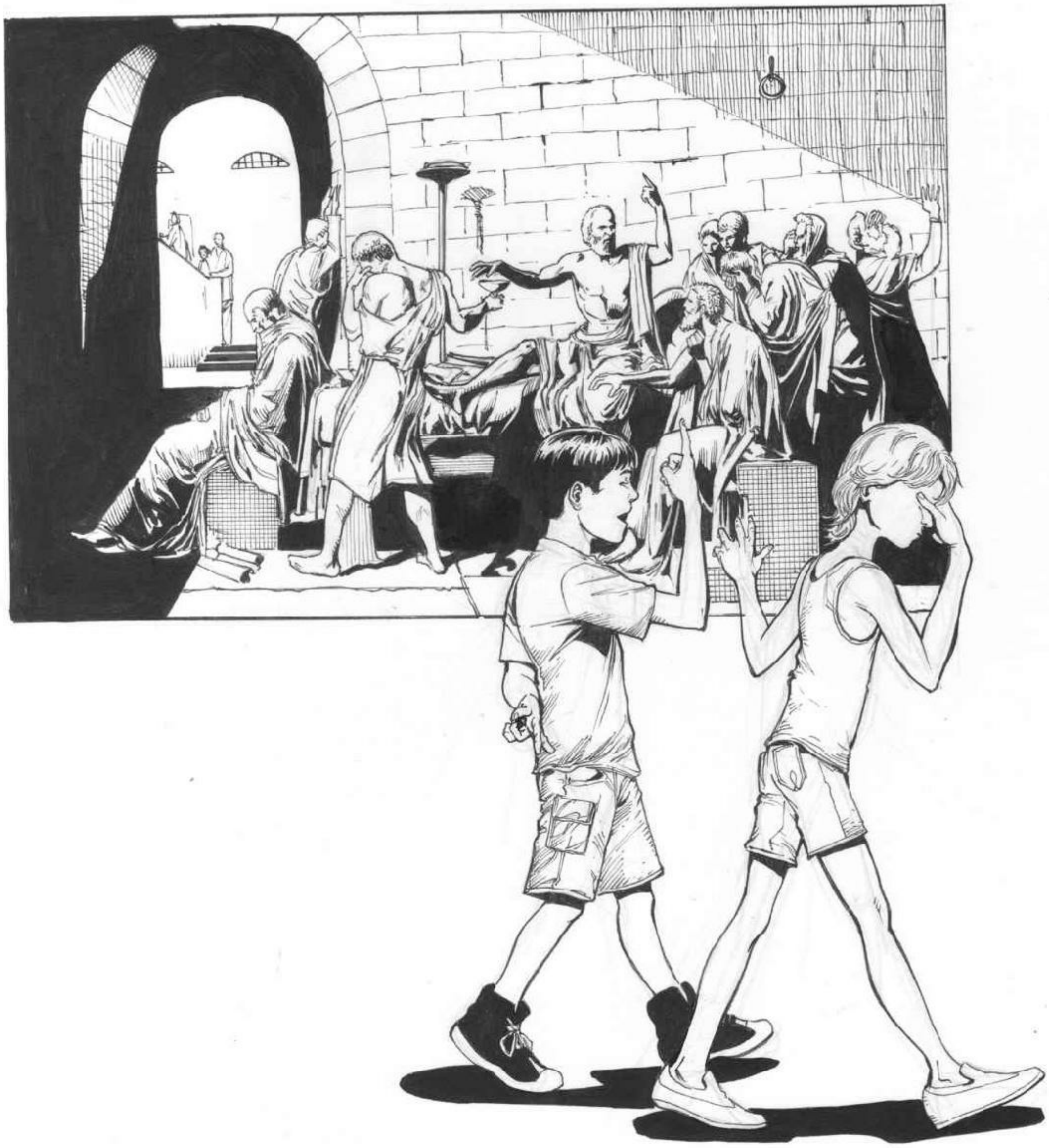
See the truth. Tell the truth.

Truth will not come in the guise of opinions shared by others, as the truth is neither a collection of slogans nor an ideology. It will instead be personal. Your truth is something only you can tell, based as it is on the unique circumstances of your life. Apprehend your personal truth. Communicate it carefully, in an articulate manner, to yourself and others. This will ensure your security and your life more abundantly now, while you inhabit the structure of your current beliefs. This will ensure the benevolence of the future, diverging as it might from the certainties of the past.

The truth springs forth ever anew from the most profound wellsprings of Being. It will keep your soul from withering and dying while you encounter the inevitable tragedy of life. It will help you avoid the terrible desire to seek vengeance for that tragedy—part of the terrible sin of Being, which everything must bear gracefully, just so it can exist.

If your life is not what it could be, try telling the truth. If you cling desperately to an ideology, or wallow in nihilism, try telling the truth. If you feel weak and rejected, and desperate, and confused, try telling the truth. In Paradise, everyone speaks the truth. That is what makes it Paradise.

Tell the truth. Or, at least, don't lie.



RULE 9

ASSUME THAT THE PERSON YOU ARE LISTENING TO MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T

NOT ADVICE

Psychotherapy is not advice. Advice is what you get when the person you're talking with about something horrible and complicated wishes you would just shut up and go away. Advice is what you get when the person you are talking to wants to revel in the superiority of his or her own intelligence. If you weren't so stupid, after all, you wouldn't have your stupid problems.

Psychotherapy is genuine conversation. Genuine conversation is exploration, articulation and strategizing. When you're involved in a genuine conversation, you're listening, and talking—but mostly listening. Listening is paying attention. It's amazing what people will tell you if you listen. Sometimes if you listen to people they will even tell you what's wrong with them. Sometimes they will even tell you how they plan to fix it. Sometimes that helps you fix something wrong with yourself. One surprising time (and this is only one occasion of many when such things happened), I was listening to someone very carefully, and she told me within minutes (a) that she was a witch and (b) that her witch coven spent a lot of its time visualizing world peace together. She was a long-time lower-level functionary in some bureaucratic job. I would never have guessed that she was a witch. I also didn't know that witch covens spent any of their time visualizing world peace. I didn't know what to make of any of it, either, but it wasn't boring, and that's something.

In my clinical practice, I talk and I listen. I talk more to some people, and listen more to others. Many of the people I listen to have no one else to talk to. Some of them are truly alone in the world. There are far more people like that than you think. You don't meet them, because they are alone. Others are

surrounded by tyrants or narcissists or drunks or traumatized people or professional victims. Some are not good at articulating themselves. They go off on tangents. They repeat themselves. They say vague and contradictory things. They're hard to listen to. Others have terrible things happening around them. They have parents with Alzheimer's or sick children. There's not much time left over for their personal concerns.

One time a client who I had been seeing for a few months came into my office[fn1] for her scheduled appointment and, after some brief preliminaries, she announced "I think I was raped." It is not easy to know how to respond to a statement like that, although there is frequently some mystery around such events. Often alcohol is involved, as it is in most sexual assault cases. Alcohol can cause ambiguity. That's partly why people drink. Alcohol temporarily lifts the terrible burden of self-consciousness from people. Drunk people know about the future, but they don't care about it. That's exciting. That's exhilarating. Drunk people can party like there's no tomorrow. But, because there is a tomorrow—most of the time—drunk people also get in trouble. They black out. They go to dangerous places with careless people. They have fun. But they also get raped. So, I immediately thought something like that might be involved. How else to understand "I think"? But that wasn't the end of the story. She added an extra detail: "Five times." The first sentence was awful enough, but the second produced something unfathomable. Five times? What could that possibly mean?

My client told me that she would go to a bar and have a few drinks. Someone would start to talk with her. She would end up at his place or her place with him. The evening would proceed, inevitably, to its sexual climax. The next day she would wake up, uncertain about what happened—uncertain about her motives, uncertain about his motives, and uncertain about the world. Miss S, we'll call her, was vague to the point of non-existence. She was a ghost of a person. She dressed, however, like a professional. She knew how to present herself, for first appearances. In consequence, she had finagled her way onto a government advisory board considering the construction of a major piece of transportation infrastructure (even though she knew nothing about government, advising or construction). She also hosted a local public-access radio show dedicated to small business, even though she had never held a real job, and knew nothing about being an

entrepreneur. She had been receiving welfare payments for the entirety of her adulthood.

Her parents had never provided her with a minute of attention. She had four brothers and they were not at all good to her. She had no friends now, and none in the past. She had no partner. She had no one to talk to, and she didn't know how to think on her own (that's not rare). She had no self. She was, instead, a walking cacophony of unintegrated experiences. I had tried previously to help her find a job. I asked her if she had a CV. She said yes. I asked her to bring it to me. She brought it to our next session. It was fifty pages long. It was in a file folder box, divided into sections, with manila tag separators—the ones with the little colorful index-markers on the sides. The sections included such topics as "My Dreams" and "Books I Have Read." She had written down dozens of her night-time dreams in the "My Dreams" section, and provided brief summaries and reviews of her reading material. This was what she proposed to send to prospective employers (or perhaps already had: who really knew?). It is impossible to understand how much someone has to be no one at all to exist in a world where a file folder box containing fifty indexed pages listing dreams and novels constitutes a CV. Miss S knew nothing about herself. She knew nothing about other individuals. She knew nothing about the world. She was a movie played out of focus. And she was desperately waiting for a story about herself to make it all make sense.

If you add some sugar to cold water, and stir it, the sugar will dissolve. If you heat up that water, you can dissolve more. If you heat the water to boiling, you can add a lot more sugar and get that to dissolve too. Then, if you take that boiling sugar water, and slowly cool it, and don't bump it or jar it, you can trick it (I don't know how else to phrase this) into holding a lot more dissolved sugar than it would have it if it had remained cold all along. That's called a super-saturated solution. If you drop a single crystal of sugar into that super-saturated solution, all the excess sugar will suddenly and dramatically crystallize. It's as if it were crying out for order. That was my client. People like her are the reason that the many forms of psychotherapy currently practised all work. People can be so confused that their psyches will be ordered and their lives improved by the adoption of any reasonably orderly system of interpretation. This is the bringing together of the disparate elements of their lives in a disciplined manner—any disciplined manner. So,

if you have come apart at the seams (or if you never have been together at all) you can restructure your life on Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian, Rogerian or behavioural principles. At least then you make sense. At least then you're coherent. At least then you might be good for something, if not good yet for everything. You can't fix a car with an axe, but you can cut down a tree. That's still something.

At about the same time I was seeing this client, the media was all afire with stories of recovered memories—particularly of sexual assault. The dispute raged apace: were these genuine accounts of past trauma? Or were they post-hoc constructs, dreamed up as a consequence of pressure wittingly or unwittingly applied by incautious therapists, grasped onto desperately by clinical clients all-too-eager to find a simple cause for all their trouble? Sometimes, it was the former, perhaps; and sometimes the latter. I understood much more clearly and precisely, however, how easy it might be to instill a false memory into the mental landscape as soon as my client revealed her uncertainty about her sexual experiences. The past appears fixed, but it's not—not in an important psychological sense. There is an awful lot to the past, after all, and the way we organize it can be subject to drastic revision.

Imagine, for example, a movie where nothing but terrible things happen. But, in the end, everything works out. Everything is resolved. A sufficiently happy ending can change the meaning of all the previous events. They can all be viewed as worthwhile, given that ending. Now imagine another movie. A lot of things are happening. They're all exciting and interesting. But there are a lot of them. Ninety minutes in, you start to worry. "This is a great movie," you think, "but there are a lot of things going on. I sure hope the filmmaker can pull it all together." But that doesn't happen. Instead, the story ends, abruptly, unresolved, or something facile and clichéd occurs. You leave deeply annoyed and unsatisfied—failing to notice that you were fully engaged and enjoying the movie almost the whole time you were in the theatre. The present can change the past, and the future can change the present.

When you are remembering the past, as well, you remember some parts of it and forget others. You have clear memories of some things that happened, but not others, of potentially equal import—just as in the present you are aware of some aspects of your surroundings and unconscious of others. You categorize your experience, grouping some elements together, and separating

them from the rest. There is a mysterious arbitrariness about all of this. You don't form a comprehensive, objective record. You can't. You just don't know enough. You just can't perceive enough. You're not objective, either. You're alive. You're subjective. You have vested interests—at least in yourself, at least usually. What exactly should be included in the story? Where exactly is the border between events?

The sexual abuse of children is distressingly common.[156] However, it's not as common as poorly trained psychotherapists think, and it also does not always produce terribly damaged adults.[157] People vary in their resilience. An event that will wipe one person out can be shrugged off by another. But therapists with a little second-hand knowledge of Freud often axiomatically assume that a distressed adult in their practice must have been subject to childhood sexual abuse. Why else would they be distressed? So, they dig, and infer, and intimate, and suggest, and overreact, and bias and tilt. They exaggerate the importance of some events, and downplay the importance of others. They trim the facts to fit their theory.[158] And they convince their clients that they were sexually abused—if they could only remember. And then the clients start to remember. And then they start to accuse. And sometimes what they remember never happened, and the people accused are innocent. The good news? At least the therapist's theory remains intact. That's good—for the therapist. But there's no shortage of collateral damage. However, people are often willing to produce a lot of collateral damage if they can retain their theory.

I knew about all this when Miss S came to talk to me about her sexual experiences. When she recounted her trips to the singles bars, and their recurring aftermath, I thought a bunch of things at once. I thought, "You're so vague and so non-existent. You're a denizen of chaos and the underworld. You are going ten different places at the same time. Anyone can take you by the hand and guide you down the road of their choosing." After all, if you're not the leading man in your own drama, you're a bit player in someone else's —and you might well be assigned to play a dismal, lonely and tragic part. After Miss S recounted her story, we sat there. I thought, "You have normal sexual desires. You're extremely lonely. You're unfulfilled sexually. You're afraid of men and ignorant of the world and know nothing of yourself. You

wander around like an accident waiting to happen and the accident happens and that's your life."

I thought, "Part of you wants to be taken. Part of you wants to be a child. You were abused by your brothers and ignored by your father and so part of you wants revenge upon men. Part of you is guilty. Another part is ashamed. Another part is thrilled and excited. Who are you? What did you do? What happened?" What was the objective truth? There was no way of knowing the objective truth. And there never would be. There was no objective observer, and there never would be. There was no complete and accurate story. Such a thing did not and could not exist. There were, and are, only partial accounts and fragmentary viewpoints. But some are still better than others. Memory is not a description of the objective past. *Memory is a tool*. Memory is the past's guide to the future. If you remember that something bad happened, and you can figure out why, then you can try to avoid that bad thing happening again. That's the purpose of memory. It's not "to remember the past." It's to stop the same damn thing from happening over and over.

I thought, "I could simplify Miss S's life. I could say that her suspicions of rape were fully justified, and that her doubt about the events was nothing but additional evidence of her thorough and long-term victimization. I could insist that her sexual partners had a legal obligation to ensure that she was not too impaired by alcohol to give consent. I could tell her that she had indisputably been subject to violent and illicit acts, unless she had consented to each sexual move explicitly and verbally. I could tell her that she was an innocent victim." I could have told her all that. And it would have been true. And she would have accepted it as true, and remembered it for the rest of her life. She would have been a new person, with a new history, and a new destiny.

But I also thought, "I could tell Miss S that she is a walking disaster. I could tell her that she wanders into a bar like a courtesan in a coma, that she is a danger to herself and others, that she needs to wake up, and that if she goes to singles bars and drinks too much and is taken home and has rough violent sex (or even tender caring sex), then what the hell does she expect?" In other words, I could have told her, in more philosophical terms, that she was Nietzsche's "pale criminal"—the person who at one moment dares to break the sacred law and at the next shrinks from paying the price. And that

would have been true, too, and she would have accepted it as such, and remembered it.

If I had been the adherent of a left-wing, social-justice ideology, I would have told her the first story. If I had been the adherent of a conservative ideology, I would have told her the second. And her responses after having been told either the first or the second story would have proved to my satisfaction and hers that the story I had told her was true—completely, irrefutably true. And that would have been advice.

Figure It Out for Yourself

I decided instead to listen. I have learned not to steal my clients' problems from them. I don't want to be the redeeming hero or the *deus ex machina*—not in someone else's story. I don't want their lives. So, I asked her to tell me what she thought, and I listened. She talked a lot. When we were finished, she still didn't know if she had been raped, and neither did I. Life is very complicated.

Sometimes you have to change the way you understand everything to properly understand a single something. "Was I raped?" can be a very complicated question. The mere fact that the question would present itself in that form indicates the existence of infinite layers of complexity—to say nothing of "five times." There are a myriad of questions hidden inside "Was I raped?": What is rape? What is consent? What constitutes appropriate sexual caution? How should a person defend herself? Where does the fault lie? "Was I raped?" is a hydra. If you cut off the head of a hydra, seven more grow. That's life. Miss S would have had to talk for twenty years to figure out whether she had been raped. And someone would have had to be there to listen. I started the process, but circumstances made it impossible for me to finish. She left therapy with me only somewhat less ill-formed and vague than when she first met me. But at least she didn't leave as the living embodiment of my damned ideology.

The people I listen to need to talk, because that's how people think. People need to think. Otherwise they wander blindly into pits. When people think, they simulate the world, and plan how to act in it. If they do a good job of simulating, they can figure out what stupid things they shouldn't do. Then they can not do them. Then they don't have to suffer the consequences.

That's the purpose of thinking. But we can't do it alone. We simulate the world, and plan our actions in it. Only human beings do this. That's how brilliant we are. We make little avatars of ourselves. We place those avatars in fictional worlds. Then we watch what happens. If our avatar thrives, then we act like he does, in the real world. Then we thrive (we hope). If our avatar fails, we don't go there, if we have any sense. We let him die in the fictional world, so that we don't have to really die in the present.

Imagine two children talking. The younger one says, "Wouldn't it be fun to climb up on the roof?" He has just placed a little avatar of himself in a fictional world. But his older sister objects. She chimes in. "That's stupid," she says. "What if you fall off the roof? What if Dad catches you?" The younger child can then modify the original simulation, draw the appropriate conclusion, and let the whole fictional world wither on the vine. Or not. Maybe the risk is worth it. But at least now it can be factored in. The fictional world is a bit more complete, and the avatar a bit wiser.

People think they think, but it's not true. It's mostly self-criticism that passes for thinking. True thinking is rare—just like true listening. Thinking is listening to yourself. It's difficult. To think, you have to be at least two people at the same time. Then you have to let those people disagree. Thinking is an internal dialogue between two or more different views of the world. Viewpoint One is an avatar in a simulated world. It has its own representations of past, present and future, and its own ideas about how to act. So do Viewpoints Two, and Three, and Four. Thinking is the process by which these internal avatars imagine and articulate their worlds to one another. You can't set straw men against one another when you're thinking, either, because then you're not thinking. You're rationalizing, post-hoc. You're matching what you want against a weak opponent so that you don't have to change your mind. You're propagandizing. You're using double-speak. You're using your conclusions to justify your proofs. You're hiding from the truth.

True thinking is complex and demanding. It requires you to be articulate speaker and careful, judicious listener, at the same time. It involves conflict. So, you have to tolerate conflict. Conflict involves negotiation and compromise. So, you have to learn to give and take and to modify your premises and adjust your thoughts—even your perceptions of the world. Sometimes it results in the defeat and elimination of one or more internal

avatar. They don’t like to be defeated or eliminated, either. They’re hard to build. They’re valuable. They’re alive. They like to stay alive. They’ll fight to stay alive. You better listen to them. If you don’t they’ll go underground and turn into devils and torture you. In consequence, thinking is emotionally painful, as well as physiologically demanding; more so than anything else—except not thinking. But you have to be very articulate and sophisticated to have all of this occur inside your own head. What are you to do, then, if you aren’t very good at thinking, at being two people at one time? That’s easy. You talk. But you need someone to listen. A listening person is your collaborator and your opponent.

A listening person tests your talking (and your thinking) without having to say anything. A listening person is a representative of common humanity. He stands for the crowd. Now the crowd is by no means always right, but it’s *commonly* right. It’s *typically* right. If you say something that takes everyone aback, therefore, you should reconsider what you said. I say that, knowing full well that controversial opinions are sometimes correct—sometimes so much so that the crowd will perish if it refuses to listen. It is for this reason, among others, that the individual is morally obliged to stand up and tell the truth of his or her own experience. But something new and radical is still almost always wrong. You need good, even great, reasons to ignore or defy general, public opinion. That’s your culture. It’s a mighty oak. You perch on one of its branches. If the branch breaks, it’s a long way down—farther, perhaps, than you think. If you’re reading this book, there’s a strong probability that you’re a privileged person. You can read. You have time to read. You’re perched high in the clouds. It took untold generations to get you where you are. A little gratitude might be in order. If you’re going to insist on bending the world to your way, you better have your reasons. If you’re going to stand your ground, you better have your reasons. You better have thought them through. You might otherwise be in for a very hard landing. You should do what other people do, unless you have a very good reason not to. If you’re in a rut, at least you know that other people have travelled that path. Out of the rut is too often off the road. And in the desert that awaits off the road there are highwaymen and monsters.

So speaks wisdom.

A Listening Person

A listening person can reflect the crowd. He can do that without talking. He can do that merely by letting the talking person listen to himself. That is what Freud recommended. He had his patients lay on a couch, look at the ceiling, let their minds wander, and say whatever wandered in. That's his method of *free association*. That's the way the Freudian psychoanalyst avoids transferring his or her own personal biases and opinions into the internal landscape of the patient. It was for such reasons that Freud did not face his patients. He did not want their spontaneous meditations to be altered by his emotional expressions, no matter how slight. He was properly concerned that his own opinions—and, worse, his own unresolved problems—would find themselves uncontrollably reflected in his responses and reactions, conscious and unconscious alike. He was afraid that he would in such a manner detrimentally affect the development of his patients. It was for such reasons, as well, that Freud insisted that psychoanalysts be analyzed themselves. He wanted those who practiced his method to uncover and eliminate some of their own worst blind spots and prejudices, so they would not practise corruptly. Freud had a point. He was, after all, a genius. You can tell that because people still hate him. But there are disadvantages to the detached and somewhat distant approach recommended by Freud. Many of those who seek therapy desire and need a closer, more personal relationship (although that also has its dangers). This is in part why I have opted in my practice for the conversation, instead of the Freudian method—as have most clinical psychologists.

It can be worthwhile for my clients to see my reactions. To protect them from the undue influence that might produce, I attempt to set my aim properly, so that my responses emerge from the appropriate motivation. I do what I can to want the best for them (whatever that might be). I do my best to want the best, period, as well (because that is part of wanting the best for my clients). I try to clear my mind, and to leave my own concerns aside. That way I am concentrating on what is best for my clients, while I am simultaneously alert to any cues that I might be misunderstanding what that best is. That's something that has to be negotiated, not assumed on my part. It's something that has to be managed very carefully, to mitigate the risks of close, personal interaction. My clients talk. I listen. Sometimes I respond.

Often the response is subtle. It’s not even verbal. My clients and I face each other. We make eye contact. We can see each other’s expressions. They can observe the effects of their words on me, and I can observe the effects of mine on them. They can respond to my responses.

A client of mine might say, “I hate my wife.” It’s out there, once said. It’s hanging in the air. It has emerged from the underworld, materialized from chaos, and manifested itself. It is perceptible and concrete and no longer easily ignored. It’s become real. The speaker has even startled himself. He sees the same thing reflected in my eyes. He notes that, and continues on the road to sanity. “Hold it,” he says. “Back up. That’s too harsh. *Sometimes* I hate my wife. I hate her when she won’t tell me what she wants. My mom did that all the time, too. It drove Dad crazy. It drove all of us crazy, to tell you the truth. It even drove Mom crazy! She was a nice person, but she was very resentful. Well, at least my wife isn’t as bad as my mother. Not at all. Wait! I guess my wife is actually pretty good at telling me what she wants, but I get really bothered when she doesn’t, because Mom tortured us all half to death being a martyr. That really affected me. Maybe I overreact now when it happens even a bit. Hey! I’m acting just like Dad did when Mom upset him! That isn’t me. That doesn’t have anything to do with my wife! I better let her know.” I observe from all this that my client had failed previously to properly distinguish his wife from his mother. And I see that he was possessed, unconsciously, by the spirit of his father. He sees all of that too. Now he is a bit more differentiated, a bit less an uncarved block, a bit less hidden in the fog. He has sewed up a small tear in the fabric of his culture. He says, “That was a good session, Dr. Peterson.” I nod. You can be pretty smart if you can just shut up.

I’m a collaborator and opponent even when I’m not talking. I can’t help it. My expressions broadcast my response, even when they’re subtle. So, I’m communicating, as Freud so rightly stressed, even when silent. But I also talk in my clinical sessions. How do I know when to say something? First, as I said, I put myself in the proper frame of mind. I aim properly. I want things to be better. My mind orients itself, given this goal. It tries to produce responses to the therapeutic dialogue that furthers that aim. I watch what happens, internally. I reveal my responses. That’s the first rule. Sometimes, for example, a client will say something, and a thought will occur to me, or a fantasy flit through my mind. Frequently it’s about something that was said

by the same client earlier that day, or during a previous session. Then I tell my client that thought or fantasy. Disinterestedly. I say, “You said this and I noticed that I then became aware of this.” Then we discuss it. We try to determine the relevance of meaning of my reaction. Sometimes, perhaps, it’s about me. That was Freud’s point. But sometimes it is just the reaction of a detached but positively inclined human being to a personally revealing statement by another human being. It’s meaningful—sometimes, even, corrective. Sometimes, however, it’s me that gets corrected.

You have to get along with other people. A therapist is one of those other people. A good therapist will tell you the truth about what he thinks. (That is not the same thing as telling you that what he thinks is the truth.) Then at least you have the honest opinion of at least one person. That’s not so easy to get. That’s not nothing. That’s key to the psychotherapeutic process: two people tell each other the truth—and both listen.

How Should You Listen?

Carl Rogers, one of the twentieth century’s great psychotherapists, knew something about listening. He wrote, “The great majority of us cannot listen; we find ourselves compelled to evaluate, because listening is too dangerous. The first requirement is courage, and we do not always have it.”[159] He knew that listening could transform people. On that, Rogers commented, “Some of you may be feeling that you listen well to people, and that you have never seen such results. The chances are very great indeed that your listening has not been of the type I have described.” He suggested that his readers conduct a short experiment when they next found themselves in a dispute: “Stop the discussion for a moment, and institute this rule: ‘Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker’s satisfaction.’ ” I have found this technique very useful, in my private life and in my practice. I routinely summarize what people have said to me, and ask them if I have understood properly. Sometimes they accept my summary. Sometimes I am offered a small correction. Now and then I am wrong completely. All of that is good to know.

There are several primary advantages to this process of summary. The first advantage is that I genuinely come to understand what the person is saying.

Of this, Rogers notes, “Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But if you try it you will discover it is one of the most difficult things you have ever tried to do. If you really understand a person in this way, if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, you run the risk of being changed yourself. You might see it his way, you might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or personality. This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face.” More salutary words have rarely been written.

The second advantage to the act of summary is that it aids the person in consolidation and utility of memory. Consider the following situation: A client in my practice recounts a long, meandering, emotion-laden account of a difficult period in his or her life. We summarize, back and forth. The account becomes shorter. It is now summed up, in the client’s memory (and in mine) in the form we discussed. It is now a different memory, in many ways—with luck, a *better* memory. It is now less weighty. It has been distilled; reduced to the gist. We have extracted the moral of the story. It becomes a description of the cause and the result of what happened, formulated such that repetition of the tragedy and pain becomes less likely in the future. “*This* is what happened. *This* is why. *This* is what I have to do to avoid such things from now on”: That’s a successful memory. That’s the purpose of memory. You remember the past not so that it is “accurately recorded,” to say it again, but so that you are prepared for the future.

The third advantage to employing the Rogerian method is the difficulty it poses to the careless construction of straw-man arguments. When someone opposes you, it is very tempting to oversimplify, parody, or distort his or her position. This is a counterproductive game, designed both to harm the dissenter and to unjustly raise your personal status. By contrast, if you are called upon to summarize someone’s position, so that the speaking person agrees with that summary, you may have to state the argument even more clearly and succinctly than the speaker has even yet managed. If you first give the devil his due, looking at his arguments from his perspective, you can (1) find the value in them, and learn something in the process, or (2) hone your positions against them (if you still believe they are wrong) and strengthen your arguments further against challenge. This will make you much stronger. Then you will no longer have to misrepresent your opponent’s position (and may well have bridged at least part of the gap

between the two of you). You will also be much better at withstanding your own doubts.

Sometimes it takes a long time to figure out what someone genuinely means when they are talking. This is because often they are articulating their ideas for the first time. They can't do it without wandering down blind alleys or making contradictory or even nonsensical claims. This is partly because talking (and thinking) is often more about forgetting than about remembering. To discuss an event, particularly something emotional, like a death or serious illness, is to slowly choose what to leave behind. To begin, however, much that is not necessary must be put into words. The emotion-laden speaker must recount the whole experience, in detail. Only then can the central narrative, cause and consequence, come into focus or consolidate itself. Only then can the moral of the story be derived.

Imagine that someone holds a stack of hundred-dollar bills, some of which are counterfeit. All the bills might have to be spread on a table, so that each can be seen, and any differences noted, before the genuine can be distinguished from the false. This is the sort of methodical approach you have to take when really listening to someone trying to solve a problem or communicate something important. If upon learning that some of the bills are counterfeit you too casually dismiss all of them (as you would if you were in a hurry, or otherwise unwilling to put in the effort), the person will never learn to separate wheat from chaff.

If you listen, instead, without premature judgment, people will generally tell you everything they are thinking—and with very little deceit. People will tell you the most amazing, absurd, interesting things. Very few of your conversations will be boring. (You can in fact tell whether or not you are actually listening in this manner. If the conversation is boring, you probably aren't.)

Primate Dominance–Hierarchy Manoeuvres—and Wit

Not all talking is thinking. Nor does all listening foster transformation. There are other motives for both, some of which produce much less valuable, counterproductive and even dangerous outcomes. There is the conversation, for example, where one participant is speaking merely to establish or confirm his place in the dominance hierarchy. One person begins by telling a story

about some interesting occurrence, recent or past, that involved something good, bad or surprising enough to make the listening worthwhile. The other person, now concerned with his or her potentially substandard status as less-interesting individual, immediately thinks of something better, worse, or more surprising to relate. This isn't one of those situations where two conversational participants are genuinely playing off each other, riffing on the same themes, for the mutual enjoyment of both (and everyone else). This is jockeying for position, pure and simple. You can tell when one of those conversations is occurring. They are accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment among speakers and alike, all who know that something false and exaggerated has just been said.

There is another, closely allied form of conversation, where neither speaker is listening in the least to the other. Instead, each is using the time occupied by the current speaker to conjure up what he or she will say next, which will often be something off-topic, because the person anxiously waiting to speak has not been listening. This can and will bring the whole conversational train to a shuddering halt. At this point, it is usual for those who were on board during the crash to remain silent, and look occasionally and in a somewhat embarrassed manner at each other, until everyone leaves, or someone thinks of something witty and puts Humpty Dumpty together again.

Then there is the conversation where one participant is trying to attain victory for his point of view. This is yet another variant of the dominance-hierarchy conversation. During such a conversation, which often tends toward the ideological, the speaker endeavours to (1) denigrate or ridicule the viewpoint of anyone holding a contrary position, (2) use selective evidence while doing so and, finally, (3) impress the listeners (many of whom are already occupying the same ideological space) with the validity of his assertions. The goal is to gain support for a comprehensive, unitary, oversimplified world-view. Thus, the purpose of the conversation is to make the case that *not* thinking is the correct tack. The person who is speaking in this manner believes that winning the argument makes him right, and that doing so necessarily validates the assumption-structure of the dominance hierarchy he most identifies with. This is often—and unsurprisingly—the hierarchy within which he has achieved the most success, or the one with which he is most temperamentally aligned. Almost all discussions involving politics or economics unfold in this manner, with each participant attempting

to justify fixed, *a priori* positions instead of trying to learn something or to adopt a different frame (even for the novelty). It is for this reason that conservatives and liberals alike believe their positions to be self-evident, particularly as they become more extreme. Given certain temperamentally-based assumptions, a predictable conclusion emerges—but only when you ignore the fact that the assumptions themselves are mutable.

These conversations are very different from the listening type. When a genuine listening conversation is taking place, one person at a time has the floor, and everyone else is listening. The person speaking is granted the opportunity to seriously discuss some event, usually unhappy or even tragic. Everyone else responds sympathetically. These conversations are important because the speaker is organizing the troublesome event in his or her mind, while recounting the story. The fact is important enough to bear repeating: people organize their brains with conversation. If they don't have anyone to tell their story to, they lose their minds. Like hoarders, they cannot unclutter themselves. The input of the community is required for the integrity of the individual psyche. To put it another way: It takes a village to organize a mind.

Much of what we consider healthy mental function is the result of our ability to use the reactions of others to keep our complex selves functional. *We outsource the problem of our sanity*. This is why it is the fundamental responsibility of parents to render their children socially acceptable. If a person's behaviour is such that other people can tolerate him, then all he has to do is place himself in a social context. Then people will indicate—by being interested in or bored by what he says, or laughing or not laughing at his jokes, or teasing or ridiculing, or even by lifting an eyebrow—whether his actions and statements are what they should be. Everyone is always broadcasting to everyone else their desire to encounter the ideal. We punish and reward each other precisely to the degree that each of us behaves in keeping with that desire—except, of course, when we are looking for trouble.

The sympathetic responses offered during a genuine conversation indicate that the teller is valued, and that the story being told is important, serious, deserving of consideration, and understandable. Men and women often misunderstand each other when these conversations are focused on a specified problem. Men are often accused of wanting to "fix things" too early on in a discussion. This frustrates men, who like to solve problems and to do

it efficiently and who are in fact called upon frequently by women for precisely that purpose. It might be easier for my male readers to understand why this does not work, however, if they could realize and then remember that before a problem can be solved it must be formulated precisely. Women are often intent on formulating the problem when they are discussing something, and they need to be listened to—even questioned—to help ensure clarity in the formulation. Then, whatever problem is left, if any, can be helpfully solved. (It should also be noted first that too-early problem-solving may also merely indicate a desire to escape from the effort of the problem-formulating conversation.)

Another conversational variant is the lecture. A lecture is—somewhat surprisingly—a conversation. The lecturer speaks, but the audience communicates with him or her non-verbally. A surprising amount of human interaction—much of the delivery of emotional information, for example—takes place in this manner, through postural display and facial emotion (as we noted in our discussion of Freud). A good lecturer is not only delivering facts (which is perhaps the least important part of a lecture), but also telling stories about those facts, pitching them precisely to the level of the audience's comprehension, gauging that by the interest they are showing. The story he or she is telling conveys to the members of the audience not only what the facts are, but *why* they are relevant—why it is important to know certain things about which they are currently ignorant. To demonstrate the importance of some set of facts is to tell those audience members how such knowledge could change their behaviour, or influence the way they interpret the world, so that they will now be able to avoid some obstacles and progress more rapidly to some better goals.

A good lecturer is thus talking *with* and not *at* or even *to* his or her listeners. To manage this, the lecturer needs to be closely attending to the audience's every move, gesture and sound. Perversely, *this cannot be done by watching the audience, as such*. A good lecturer speaks directly to and watches the response of single, identifiable people,[fn2] instead of doing something clichéd, such as "presenting a talk" to an audience. Everything about that phrase is wrong. You don't present. You talk. There is no such thing as "a talk," unless it's canned, and it shouldn't be. There is also no "audience." There are *individuals*, who need to be included in the

conversation. A well-practised and competent public speaker addresses a single, identifiable person, watches that individual nod, shake his head, frown, or look confused, and responds appropriately and directly to those gestures and expressions. Then, after a few phrases, rounding out some idea, he switches to another audience member, and does the same thing. In this manner, he infers and reacts to the attitude of the entire group (insofar as such a thing exists).

There are still other conversations that work primarily as demonstrations of wit. These also have a dominance element, but the goal is to be the most entertaining speaker (which is an accomplishment that everyone participating will also enjoy). The purpose of these conversations, as a witty friend of mine once observed, was to say "anything that was either true or funny." As truth and humour are often close allies, that combination worked fine. I think that this might be the intelligent blue-collar worker's conversation. I participated in many fine bouts of sarcasm, satire, insult and generally over-the-top comedic exchange around among people I grew up with in Northern Alberta and, later, among some Navy SEALs I met in California, who were friends of an author I know who writes somewhat horrifying popular fiction. They were all perfectly happy to say anything, no matter how appalling, as long it was funny.

I attended this writer's fortieth birthday celebration not too long ago in LA. He had invited one of the aforementioned SEALs. A few months beforehand, however, his wife had been diagnosed with a serious medical condition, necessitating brain surgery. He called up his SEAL friend, informed him of the circumstances, and indicated that the event might have to be cancelled. "You think you guys have a problem," responded his friend. "I just bought non-refundable airline tickets to your party!" It's not clear what percentage of the world's population would find that response amusing. I retold the story recently to a group of newer acquaintances and they were more shocked and appalled than amused. I tried to defend the joke as an indication of the SEAL's respect for the couple's ability to withstand and transcend tragedy, but I wasn't particularly successful. Nonetheless, I believe that he did intend exactly that respect, and I think he was terrifyingly witty. His joke was daring, anarchic to the point of recklessness, which is exactly the point where serious funny occurs. My friend and his wife recognized the compliment. They saw that their friend knew they were tough enough to withstand that

level of—well, let's call it competitive humour. It was a test of character, which they passed with flying colours.

I found that such conversations occurred less and less frequently as I moved from university to university, up the educational and social ladder. Maybe it wasn't a class thing, although I have my suspicions it was. Maybe it's just that I'm older, or that the friends a person makes later in life, after adolescence, lack the insane competitive closeness and perverse playfulness of those early tribal bonds. When I went back up north to my hometown for my fiftieth birthday party, however, my old friends made me laugh so hard I had to duck into a different room several times to catch my breath. Those conversations are the most fun, and I miss them. You have to keep up, or risk severe humiliation, but there is nothing more rewarding than topping the last comedian's story, joke, insult or curse. Only one rule really applies: do not be boring (although it is also very bad form to *actually* put someone down, when you are only *pretending* to put them down).

Conversation on the Way

The final type of conversation, akin to listening, is a form of mutual exploration. It requires true reciprocity on the part of those listening and speaking. It allows all participants to express and organize their thoughts. A conversation of mutual exploration has a topic, generally complex, of genuine interest to the participants. Everyone participating is trying to solve a problem, instead of insisting on the *a priori* validity of their own positions. All are acting on the premise that they have something to learn. This kind of conversation constitutes active philosophy, the highest form of thought, and the best preparation for proper living.

The people involved in such a conversation must be discussing ideas they genuinely use to structure their perceptions and guide their actions and words. They must be existentially involved with their philosophy: that is, they must be living it, not merely believing or understanding it. They also must have inverted, at least temporarily, the typical human preference for order over chaos (and I don't mean the chaos typical of mindless antisocial rebellion). Other conversational types—except for the listening type—all attempt to buttress some existing order. The conversation of mutual

exploration, by contrast, requires people who have decided that the unknown makes a better friend than the known.

You already know what you know, after all—and, unless your life is perfect, what you know is not enough. You remain threatened by disease, and self-deception, and unhappiness, and malevolence, and betrayal, and corruption, and pain, and limitation. You are subject to all these things, in the final analysis, because you are just too ignorant to protect yourself. If you just knew enough, you could be healthier and more honest. You would suffer less. You could recognize, resist and even triumph over malevolence and evil. You would neither betray a friend, nor deal falsely and deceitfully in business, politics or love. However, your current knowledge has neither made you perfect nor kept you safe. So, it is insufficient, by definition—radically, fatally insufficient.

You must accept this before you can converse philosophically, instead of convincing, oppressing, dominating or even amusing. You must accept this before you can tolerate a conversation where the Word that eternally mediates between order and chaos is operating, psychologically speaking. To have this kind of conversation, it is necessary to respect the personal experience of your conversational partners. You must assume that they have reached careful, thoughtful, genuine conclusions (and, perhaps, they must have done the work that justifies this assumption). You must believe that if they shared their conclusions with you, you could bypass at least some of the pain of personally learning the same things (as learning from the experience of others can be quicker and much less dangerous). You must meditate, too, instead of strategizing towards victory. If you fail, or refuse, to do so, then you merely and automatically repeat what you already believe, seeking its validation and insisting on its rightness. But if you are meditating as you converse, then you listen to the other person, and say the new and original things that can rise from deep within of their own accord.

It's as if you are listening to yourself during such a conversation, just as you are listening to the other person. You are describing how you are responding to the new information imparted by the speaker. You are reporting what that information has done to you—what new things it made appear within you, how it has changed your presuppositions, how it has made you think of new questions. You tell the speaker these things, directly. Then they have the same effect on him. In this manner, you both move towards

somewhere newer and broader and better. You both change, as you let your old presuppositions die—as you shed your skins and emerge renewed.

A conversation such as this is one where it is the desire for truth itself—on the part of both participants—that is truly listening and speaking. That's why it's engaging, vital, interesting and meaningful. That sense of meaning is a signal from the deep, ancient parts of your Being. You're where you should be, with one foot in order, and the other tentatively extended into chaos and the unknown. You're immersed in the Tao, following the great Way of Life. There, you're stable enough to be secure, but flexible enough to transform. There, you're allowing new information to *inform* you—to permeate your stability, to repair and improve its structure, and expand its domain. There the constituent elements of your Being can find their more elegant formation. A conversation like that places you in the same place that listening to great music places you, and for much the same reason. A conversation like that puts you in the realm where souls connect, and that's a real place. It leaves you thinking, "That was really worthwhile. We really got to know each other." The masks came off, and the searchers were revealed.

So, listen, to yourself and to those with whom you are speaking. Your wisdom then consists not of the knowledge you already have, but the continual search for knowledge, which is the highest form of wisdom. It is for this reason that the priestess of the Delphic Oracle in ancient Greece spoke most highly of Socrates, who always sought the truth. She described him as the wisest living man, because he knew that what he knew was nothing.

Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't.

RULE 10

BE PRECISE IN YOUR SPEECH

WHY IS MY LAPTOP OBSOLETE?

What do you see, when you look at a computer—at your own laptop, more precisely? You see a flat, thin, grey-and-black box. Less evidently, you see something to type on and look at. Nonetheless, even with the second perceptions included, what are you seeing is hardly the computer at all. That grey and black box happens to be a computer right now, right here and now, and maybe even an expensive computer. Nevertheless, it will soon be something so unlike a computer that it will be difficult even to give away.

We will all discard our laptops within the next five years, even though they may still work perfectly—even though the screens, keyboards, mice and internet connections may still flawlessly perform their tasks. Fifty years from now, early twenty-first-century laptops will be oddities like the brass scientific tools of the late nineteenth century. The latter now appear more like the arcane accoutrements of alchemy, designed to measure phenomena whose existence we no longer even recognize. How can high-tech machines, each possessing more computing power than the entire Apollo space program, lose their value in such a short period of time? How can they transform so quickly from exciting, useful and status-enhancing machines to complex pieces of junk? It's because of the nature of our perceptions themselves, and the oft-invisible interaction between those perceptions and the underlying complexity of the world.

Your laptop is a note in a symphony currently being played by an orchestra of incalculable size. It's a very small part of a much greater whole. Most of its capacity resides beyond its hard shell. It maintains its function only because a vast array of other technologies are currently and harmoniously at play. It is fed, for example, by a power grid whose function is invisibly dependent on the stability of a myriad of complex physical, biological, economic and interpersonal systems. The factories that make its parts are still

in operation. The operating system that enables its function is based on those parts, and not on others yet to be created. Its video hardware runs the technology expected by the creative people who post their content on the web. Your laptop is in communication with a certain, specified ecosystem of other devices and web servers.

And, finally, all this is made possible by an even less visible element: the social contract of trust—the interconnected and fundamentally honest political and economic systems that make the reliable electrical grid a reality. This interdependency of part on whole, invisible in systems that work, becomes starkly evident in systems that don't. The higher-order, surrounding systems that enable personal computing hardly exist at all in corrupt, third-world countries, so that the power lines, electrical switches, outlets, and all the other entities so hopefully and concretely indicative of such a grid are absent or compromised, and in fact make little contribution to the practical delivery of electricity to people's homes and factories. This makes perceiving the electronic and other devices that electricity theoretically enables as separate, functional units frustrating, at minimum, and impossible, at worst. This is partly because of technical insufficiency: the systems simply don't work. But it is also in no small part because of the lack of trust characteristic of systemically corrupt societies.

To put it another way: What you perceive as your computer is like a single leaf, on a tree, in a forest—or, even more accurately, like your fingers rubbing briefly across that leaf. A single leaf can be plucked from a branch. It can be perceived, briefly, as a single, self-contained entity—but that perception misleads more than clarifies. In a few weeks, the leaf will crumble and dissolve. It would not have been there at all, without the tree. It cannot continue to exist, in the absence of the tree. This is the position of our laptops in relation to the world. So much of what they are resides outside their boundaries that the screened devices we hold on our laps can only maintain their computer-like façade for a few short years.

Almost everything we see and hold is like that, although often not so evidently.

Tools, Obstacles and Extension into the World

We assume that we see objects or things when we look at the world, but that's not really how it is. Our evolved perceptual systems transform the interconnected, complex multi-level world that we inhabit not so much into *things* per se as into *useful* things (or their nemeses, things that get in the way). This is the necessary, practical reduction of the world. This is the transformation of the near-infinite complexity of things through the narrow specification of our purpose. This is how precision makes the world sensibly manifest. That is not at all the same as perceiving *objects*.

We don't see valueless entities and then attribute meaning to them. We perceive the meaning directly.[160] We see floors, to walk on, and doors, to duck through, and chairs, to sit on. It's for this reason that a beanbag and a stump both fall into the latter category, despite having little objectively in common. We see rocks, because we can throw them, and clouds, because they can rain on us, and apples, to eat, and the automobiles of other people, to get in our way and annoy us. We see tools and obstacles, not objects or things. Furthermore, we see tools and obstacles at the "handy" level of analysis that makes them most useful (or dangerous), given our needs, abilities and perceptual limitations. The world reveals itself to us as something to utilize and something to navigate through—not as something that merely is.

We see the faces of the people we are talking to, because we need to communicate with those people and cooperate with them. We don't see their microcosmic substructures, their cells, or the subcellular organelles, molecules and atoms that make up those cells. We don't see, as well, the macrocosm that surrounds them: the family members and friends that make up their immediate social circles, the economies they are embedded within, or the ecology that contains all of them. Finally, and equally importantly, we don't see them across time. We see them in the narrow, immediate, overwhelming now, instead of surrounded by the yesterdays and tomorrows that may be a more important part of them than whatever is currently and obviously manifest. And we have to see in this way, or be overwhelmed.

When we look at the world, we perceive only what is enough for our plans and actions to work and for us to get by. What we inhabit, then, is this "enough." That is a radical, functional, unconscious simplification of the world—and it's almost impossible for us not to mistake it for the world itself.

But the objects we see are not simply there, in the world, for our simple, direct perceiving.[fn1] They exist in a complex, multi-dimensional relationship to one another, not as self-evidently separate, bounded, independent objects. We perceive not them, but their functional utility and, in doing so, we make them sufficiently simple for sufficient understanding. *It is for this reason that we must be precise in our aim*. Absent that, we drown in the complexity of the world.

This is true even for our perceptions of ourselves, of our individual persons. We assume that we end at the surface of our skin, because of the way that we perceive. But we can understand with a little thought the provisional nature of that boundary. We shift what is inside our skin, so to speak, as the context we inhabit changes. Even when we do something as apparently simple as picking up a screwdriver, our brain automatically adjusts what it considers body to include the tool.[161] We can literally feel things with the end of the screwdriver. When we extend a hand, holding the screwdriver, we automatically take the length of the latter into account. We can probe nooks and crannies with its extended end, and comprehend what we are exploring. Furthermore, we instantly regard the screwdriver we are holding as "our" screwdriver, and get possessive about it. We do the same with the much more complex tools we use, in much more complex situations. The cars we pilot instantaneously and automatically become ourselves. Because of this, when someone bangs his fist on our car's hood after we have irritated him at a crosswalk, we take it personally. This is not always reasonable. Nonetheless, without the extension of self into machine, it would be impossible to drive.

The extensible boundaries of our selves also expand to include other people—family members, lovers and friends. A mother will sacrifice herself for her children. Is our father or son or wife or husband more or less integral to us than an arm or a leg? We can answer, in part, by asking: Which we rather lose? Which loss would we sacrifice more to avoid? We practice for such permanent extension—such permanent commitment—by identifying with the fictional characters of books and movies. Their tragedies and triumphs rapidly and convincingly become ours. Sitting still in our seats, we nonetheless act out a multitude of alternate realities, extending ourselves experimentally, testing multiple potential paths, before specifying the one we

will actually take. Engrossed in a fictional world, we can even become things that don't "really" exist. In the blink of an eye, in the magic hall of a movie theatre, we can become fantastical creatures. We sit in the dark before rapidly flickering images and become witches, superheroes, aliens, vampires, lions, elves or wooden marionettes. We feel everything they feel, and are peculiarly happy to pay for the privilege, even when what we experience is sorrow, fear or horror.

Something similar, but more extreme, happens when we identify, not with a character in a fictional drama, but with a whole group, in a competition. Think of what happens when a favourite team wins or loses an important game against an arch-rival. The winning goal will bring the whole network of fans to their feet, before they think, in unscripted unison. It is as if their many nervous systems are directly wired to the game unfolding in front of them. Fans take the victories and defeats of their teams very personally, even wearing the jerseys of their heroes, often celebrating their wins and losses more than any such events that "actually" occur in their day-to-day lives. This identification manifests itself deeply—even biochemically and neurologically. Vicarious experiences of winning and losing, for example, raise and lower testosterone levels among fans "participating" in the contest.[162] Our capacity for identification is something that manifests itself at every level of our Being.

To the degree that we are patriotic, similarly, our country is not just *important* to us. It *is* us. We might even sacrifice our entire smaller individual selves, in battle, to maintain the integrity of our country. For much of history, such willingness to die has been regarded as something admirable and courageous, as a part of human duty. Paradoxically, that is a direct consequence not of our aggression but of our extreme sociability and willingness to cooperate. If we can become not only ourselves, but our families, teams and countries, cooperation comes easily to us, relying on the same deeply innate mechanisms that drive us (and other creatures) to protect our very bodies.

The World Is Simple Only When It Behaves

It is very difficult to make sense of the interconnected chaos of reality, just by looking at it. It's a very complicated act, requiring, perhaps, half our brains.

Everything shifts and changes in the real world. Each hypothetically separate thing is made up of smaller hypothetically separate things, and is simultaneously part of larger hypothetically separate things. The boundaries between the levels—and between different things themselves at a given level—are neither clear nor self-evident, objectively. They must be established practically, pragmatically, and they retain their validity only under very narrow and specified conditions. The conscious illusion of complete and sufficient perception only sustains itself, for example—only remains sufficient for our purposes—when everything goes according to plan. Under such circumstances, what we see is accurate enough, so that there is no utility in looking farther. To drive successfully, we don't have to understand, or even perceive, the complex machinery of our automobiles. The hidden complexities of our private cars only intrude on our consciousness when that machinery fails, or when we collide unexpectedly with something (or something with us). Even in the case of mere mechanical failure (to say nothing of a serious accident) such intrusion is always felt, at least initially, as anxiety-provoking. That's a consequence of emergent uncertainty.

A car, as we perceive it, is not a thing, or an object. It is instead something that takes us somewhere we want to go. It is only when it stops taking us and going, in fact, that we perceive it much at all. It is only when a car quits, suddenly—or is involved in an accident and must be pulled over to the side of the road—that we are forced to apprehend and analyze the myriad of parts that "car as thing that goes" depends on. When our car fails, our incompetence with regards to its complexity is instantly revealed. That has practical consequences (we don't get to go to where we were going), as well as psychological: our peace of mind disappears along with our functioning vehicle. We must generally turn to the experts who inhabit garages and workshops to restore both functionality to our vehicle and simplicity to our perceptions. That's mechanic-as-psychologist.

It is precisely then that we can understand, although we seldom deeply consider, the staggeringly low-resolution quality of our vision and the inadequacy of our corresponding understanding. In a crisis, when our thing no longer goes, we turn to those whose expertise far transcends ours to restore the match between our expectant desire and what actually happens. This all means that the failure of our car can also force us to confront the uncertainty of the broader social context, which is usually invisible to us, in

which the machine (and mechanic) are mere parts. Betrayed by our car, we come up against all the things we don’t know. Is it time for a new vehicle? Did I err in my original purchase? Is the mechanic competent, honest and reliable? Is the garage he works for trustworthy? Sometimes, too, we must contemplate something worse, something broader and deeper: Have the roads now become too dangerous? Have I become (or always been) too incompetent? Too scattered and inattentive? Too old? The limitations of all our perceptions of things and selves manifest themselves when something we can usually depend on in our simplified world breaks down. Then the more complex world that was always there, invisible and conveniently ignored, makes its presence known. It is then that the walled garden we archetypally inhabit reveals its hidden but ever-present snakes.

You and I Are Simple Only When the World Behaves

When things break down, what has been ignored rushes in. When things are no longer specified, with precision, the walls crumble, and chaos makes its presence known. When we’ve been careless, and let things slide, what we have refused to attend to gathers itself up, adopts a serpentine form, and strikes—often at the worst possible moment. It is then that we see what focused intent, precision of aim and careful attention protects us from.

Imagine a loyal and honest wife suddenly confronted by evidence of her husband’s infidelity. She has lived alongside him for years. She saw him as she assumes he is: reliable, hard-working, loving, dependable. In her marriage, she is standing on a rock, or so she believes. But he becomes less attentive and more distracted. He begins, in the clichéd manner, to work longer hours. Small things she says and does irritate him unjustifiably. One day she sees him in a downtown café with another woman, interacting with her in a manner difficult to rationalize and ignore. The limitations and inaccuracy of her former perceptions become immediately and painfully obvious.

Her theory of her husband collapses. What happens, in consequence? First, something—someone—emerges in his stead: a complex, frightening stranger. That’s bad enough. But it’s only half the problem. Her theory of herself collapses, too, in the aftermath of the betrayal, so that it’s not one stranger that’s the problem: it’s two. Her husband is not who she perceived him to be

—but neither is she, the betrayed wife. She is no longer the "well-loved, secure wife, and valued partner." Strangely enough, despite our belief in the permanent immutability of the past, she may never have been.

The past is not necessarily what it was, even though it has already been. The present is chaotic and indeterminate. The ground shifts continually around her feet, and ours. Equally, the future, not yet here, changes into something it was not supposed to be. Is the once reasonably content wife now a "deceived innocent"—or a "gullible fool"? Should she view herself as victim, or as co-conspirator in a shared delusion? Her husband is—what? An unsatisfied lover? A target of seduction? A psychopathic liar? The very Devil himself? *How could he be so cruel?* How could anyone? What is this home she has been living in? How could she be so naïve? How could anyone? She looks in the mirror. *Who is she? What's going on?* Are any of her relationships real? Have any of them ever been? What has happened to the future? Everything is up for grabs, when the deeper realities of the world unexpectedly manifest themselves.

Everything is intricate beyond imagining. Everything is affected by everything else. We perceive a very narrow slice of a causally interconnected matrix, although we strive with all our might to avoid being confronted by knowledge of that narrowness. The thin veneer of perceptual sufficiency cracks, however, when something fundamental goes wrong. The dreadful inadequacy of our senses reveals itself. Everything we hold dear crumbles to dust. We freeze. We turn to stone. What then do we see? Where can we look, when it is precisely what we see that has been insufficient?

What Do We See When We Don't Know What We're Looking At?

What is it, that is the world, after the Twin Towers disintegrate? What, if anything, is left standing? What dread beast rises from the ruins when the invisible pillars supporting the world's financial system tremble and fall? What do we see when we are swept up in the fire and drama of a National Socialist rally, or cower, paralyzed with fear, in the midst of a massacre in Rwanda? What is it that we see, when we cannot understand what is happening to us, cannot determine where we are, know no longer who we are, and no longer understand what surrounds us? What we *don't* see is the well-known and comforting world of tools—of useful objects—of

personalities. We don't even see familiar obstacles—sufficiently troubling though they are in normal times, already mastered—that we can simply step around.

What we perceive, when things fall apart, is no longer the stage and settings of habitable order. It's the eternal watery *tohu va bohu*, formless emptiness, and the *tehom*, the abyss, to speak biblically—the chaos forever lurking beneath our thin surfaces of security. It's from that chaos that the Holy Word of God Himself extracted order at the beginning of time, according to the oldest opinions expressed by mankind (and it is in the image of that same Word that we were made, male and female, according to the same opinions). It's from that chaos that whatever stability we had the good fortune to experience emerged, originally—for some limited time—when we first learned to perceive. It's chaos that we see, when things fall apart (even though we cannot truly see it). What does all this mean?

Emergency—emergence(y). This is the sudden manifestation from somewhere unknown of some previously unknown phenomenon (from the Greek *phainesthai*, to "shine forth"). This is the reappearance of the eternal dragon, from its eternal cavern, from its now-disrupted slumber. This is the underworld, with its monsters rising from the depths. How do we prepare for an emergency, when we do not know what has emerged, or from where? How do we prepare for catastrophe, when we do not know what to expect, or how to act? We turn from our minds, so to speak—too slow, too ponderous—to our bodies. Our bodies react much faster than our minds.

When things collapse around us our perception disappears, and we act. Ancient reflexive responses, rendered automatic and efficient over hundreds of millions of years, protect us in those dire moments when not only thought but perception itself fails. Under such circumstances, our bodies ready themselves for all possible eventualities.[163] First, we freeze. The reflexes of the body then shade into emotion, the next stage of perception. Is this something scary? Something useful? Something that must be fought? Something that can be ignored? How will we determine this—and when? We don't know. Now we are in a costly and demanding state of readiness. Our bodies are flooded with cortisol and adrenaline. Our hearts beat faster. Our breath quickens. We realize, painfully, that our sense of competence and completeness is gone; it was just a dream. We draw on physical and

psychological resources saved carefully for just this moment (if we are fortunate enough to have them). We prepare for the worst—or the best. We push the gas pedal furiously to the floor, and slam on the brakes at the same time. We scream, or laugh. We look disgusted, or terrified. We cry. And then we begin to parse apart the chaos.

And so, the deceived wife, increasingly unhinged, feels the motivation to reveal all—to herself, her sister, her best friend, to a stranger on a bus—or retreats into silence, and ruminates obsessively, to the same end. *What went wrong? What did she do that was so unforgivable? Who is this person she has been living with? What kind of world is this, where such things can happen? What kind of God would make such a place?* What conversation could she possibly initiate with this new, infuriating person, inhabiting the shell of her former husband? What forms of revenge might satisfy her anger? Who could she seduce, in return for this insult? She is by turns enraged, terrified, struck down by pain, and exhilarated by the possibilities of her new-found freedom.

Her last place of bedrock security was in fact not stable, not certain—not bedrock at all. Her house was built on a foundation of sand. The ice she was skating on was simply too thin. She fell through, into the water below, and is drowning. She has been hit so hard that her anger, terror and grief consume her. Her sense of betrayal widens, until the whole world caves in. Where is she? *In the underworld, with all its terrors.* How did she get there? This experience, this voyage into the substructure of things—this is all perception, too, in its nascent form; this preparation; this consideration of what-might-have-been and what-could-still-be; this emotion and fantasy. This is all the deep perception now necessary before the familiar objects that she once knew reappear, if they ever do, in their simplified and comfortable form. This is perception before the chaos of possibility is re-articulated into the functional realities of order.

“Was it really so unexpected?” she asks herself—she asks others—thinking back. Should she now feel guilty about ignoring the warning signs, subtle though they may have been, encouraged though she was to avoid them? She remembers when she first married, eagerly joining her husband, every single night, to make love. Perhaps that was too much to expect—or even too much to cope with—but once, in the last six months? Once every

two or three months, for years, before that? Would anyone she could truly respect—including herself—put up with such a situation?

There is a story for children, *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon*, by Jack Kent, that I really like. It's a very simple tale, at least on the surface. I once read its few pages to a group of retired University of Toronto alumni, and explained its symbolic meaning.[fn2] It's about a small boy, Billy Bixbee, who spies a dragon sitting on his bed one morning. It's about the size of a house cat, and friendly. He tells his mother about it, but she tells him that there's no such thing as a dragon. So, it starts to grow. It eats all of Billy's pancakes. Soon it fills the whole house. Mom tries to vacuum, but she has to go in and out of the house through the windows because of the dragon everywhere. It takes her forever. Then, the dragon runs off with the house. Billy's dad comes home—and there's just an empty space, where he used to live. The mailman tells him where the house went. He chases after it, climbs up the dragon's head and neck (now sprawling out into the street) and rejoins his wife and son. Mom still insists that the dragon does not exist, but Billy, who's pretty much had it by now, insists, "There is a dragon, Mom." Instantly, it starts to shrink. Soon, it's cat-sized again. Everyone agrees that dragons of that size (1) exist and (2) are much preferable to their gigantic counterparts. Mom, eyes reluctantly opened by this point, asks somewhat plaintively why it had to get so big. Billy quietly suggests: "maybe it wanted to be noticed."

Maybe! That's the moral of many, many stories. Chaos emerges in a household, bit by bit. Mutual unhappiness and resentment pile up. Everything untidy is swept under the rug, where the dragon feasts on the crumbs. But no one says anything, as the shared society and negotiated order of the household reveals itself as inadequate, or disintegrates, in the face of the unexpected and threatening. Everybody whistles in the dark, instead. Communication would require admission of terrible emotions: resentment, terror, loneliness, despair, jealousy, frustration, hatred, boredom. Moment by moment, it's easier to keep the peace. But in the background, in Billy Bixbee's house, and in all that are like it, the dragon grows. One day it bursts forth, in a form that no one can ignore. It lifts the very household from its foundations. Then it's an affair, or a decades-long custody dispute of ruinous economic and psychological proportions. Then it's the concentrated version

of the acrimony that could have been spread out, tolerably, issue by issue, over the years of the pseudo-paradise of the marriage. Every one of the three hundred thousand unrevealed issues, which have been lied about, avoided, rationalized away, hidden like an army of skeletons in some great horrific closet, bursts forth like Noah's flood, drowning everything. There's no ark, because no one built one, even though everyone felt the storm gathering.

Don't ever underestimate the destructive power of sins of omission.

Maybe the demolished couple could have had a conversation, or two, or two hundred, about their sex lives. Maybe the physical intimacy they undoubtedly shared should have been matched, as it often is not, *by a corresponding psychological intimacy*. Maybe they could have fought through their roles. In many households, in recent decades, the traditional household division of labour has been demolished, not least in the name of liberation and freedom. That demolition, however, has not left so much glorious lack of restriction in its wake as chaos, conflict and indeterminacy. The escape from tyranny is often followed not by Paradise, but by a sojourn in the desert, aimless, confused and deprived. Furthermore, in the absence of agreed-upon tradition (and the constraints—often uncomfortable; often even unreasonable—that it imposes) there exist only three difficult options: slavery, tyranny or negotiation. The slave merely does what he or she is told—happy, perhaps, to shed the responsibility—and solves the problem of complexity in that manner. But it's a temporary solution. The spirit of the slave rebels. The tyrant merely tells the slave what to do, and solves the problem of complexity in that manner. But it's a temporary solution. The tyrant tires of the slave. There's nothing and no one there, except for predictable and sullen obedience. Who can live forever with that? But negotiation—that requires forthright admission on the part of both players that the dragon exists. That's a reality difficult to face, even when it's still too small to simply devour the knight who dares confront it.

Maybe the demolished couple could have more precisely specified their desired manner of Being. Maybe in that manner they could have jointly prevented the waters of chaos from springing uncontrollably forth and drowning them. Maybe they could have done that instead of saying, in the agreeable, lazy and cowardly way: "It's OK. It's not worth fighting about." There is little, in a marriage, that is so little that it is not worth fighting about. You're stuck in a marriage like the two proverbial cats in a barrel, bound by

the oath that lasts in theory until one or both of you die. That oath is there to make you take the damn situation seriously. Do you really want the same petty annoyance tormenting you every single day of your marriage, for the decades of its existence?

“Oh, I can put up with it,” you think. And maybe you should. You’re no paragon of genuine tolerance. And maybe if you brought up how your partner’s giddy laugh is beginning to sound like nails on a blackboard he (or she) would tell you, quite properly, to go to hell. And maybe the fault is with you, and you should grow up, get yourself together and keep quiet. But perhaps braying like a donkey in the midst of a social gathering is not reflecting well on your partner, and you should stick to your guns. Under such circumstances, there is nothing but a fight—a fight with peace as the goal—that will reveal the truth. But you remain silent, and you convince yourself it’s because you are a good, peace-loving, patient person (and nothing could be further from the truth). And the monster under the rug gains a few more pounds.

Maybe a forthright conversation about sexual dissatisfaction might have been the proverbial stitch in time—not that it would be easy. Perhaps *madame* desired the death of intimacy, clandestinely, because she was deeply and secretly ambivalent about sex. God knows there’s reason to be. Perhaps *monsieur* was a terrible, selfish lover. Maybe they both were. Sorting that out is worth a fight, isn’t it? That’s a big part of life, isn’t it? Perhaps addressing that and (you never know) solving the problem would be worth two months of pure misery just telling each other the truth (not with intent to destroy, or attain victory, because that’s not the truth: that’s just all-out war).

Maybe it wasn’t sex. Maybe every conversation between husband and wife had deteriorated into boring routine, as no shared adventure animated the couple. Maybe that deterioration was easier, moment by moment, day by day, than bearing the responsibility of keeping the relationship alive. Living things die, after all, without attention. Life is indistinguishable from effortful maintenance. No one finds a match so perfect that the need for continued attention and work vanishes (and, besides, if you found the perfect person, he or she would run away from ever-so-imperfect you in justifiable horror). In truth, what you need—what you deserve, after all—is someone exactly as imperfect as you.

Maybe the husband who betrayed his wife was appallingly immature and

selfish. Maybe that selfishness got the upper hand. Maybe she did not oppose this tendency with enough force and vigour. Maybe she could not agree with him on the proper disciplinary approach to the children, and shut him out of their lives, in consequence. Maybe that allowed him to circumvent what he saw as an unpleasant responsibility. Maybe hatred brewed in the hearts of the children, watching this underground battle, punished by the resentment of their mother and alienated, bit by bit, from good old Dad. Maybe the dinners she prepared for him—or he for her—were cold and bitterly eaten. Maybe all that unaddressed conflict left both resentful, in a manner unspoken, but effectively enacted. Maybe all that unspoken trouble started to undermine the invisible networks that supported the marriage. Maybe respect slowly turned into contempt, and no one deigned to notice. Maybe love slowly turned into hate, without mention.

Everything clarified and articulated becomes visible; maybe neither wife nor husband wished to see or understand. Maybe they left things purposefully in the fog. Maybe they generated the fog, to hide what they did not want to see. What did missus gain, when she turned from mistress to maid or mother? Was it a relief when her sex life disappeared? Could she complain more profitably to the neighbours and her mother when her husband turned away? Maybe that was more gratifying, secretly, than anything good that could be derived from any marriage, no matter how perfect. What can possibly compare to the pleasures of sophisticated and well-practised martyrdom? "She's such a saint, and married to such a terrible man. She deserved much better." That's a gratifying myth to live by, even if unconsciously chosen (the truth of the situation be damned). Maybe she never really liked her husband. Maybe she never really liked men, and still doesn't. Maybe that was her mother's fault—or her grandmother's. Maybe she mimicked their behaviour, acting out their trouble, transmitted unconsciously, implicitly, down the generations. Maybe she was taking revenge on her father, or her brother, or society.

What did her husband gain, for his part, when his sex life at home died? Did he willingly play along, as martyr, and complain bitterly to his friends? Did he use it as the excuse he wanted anyway to search for a new lover? Did he use it to justify the resentment he still felt towards women, in general, for the rejections he had faced so continuously before falling into his marriage?

Did he seize the opportunity to get effortlessly fat and lazy because he wasn't desired, in any case?

Maybe both, wife and husband alike, used the opportunity to mess up their marriage to take revenge upon God (perhaps the one Being who could have sorted through the mess).

Here's the terrible truth about such matters: every single voluntarily unprocessed and uncomprehended and ignored reason for marital failure will compound and conspire and will then plague that betrayed and self-betrayed woman for the rest of her life. The same goes for her husband. All she—he—they—or we—must do to ensure such an outcome *is nothing*: *don't notice, don't react, don't attend, don't discuss, don't consider, don't work for peace, don't take responsibility*. Don't confront the chaos and turn it into order—just wait, anything but naïve and innocent, for the chaos to rise up and engulf you instead.

Why avoid, when avoidance necessarily and inevitably poisons the future? Because the possibility of a monster lurks underneath all disagreements and errors. Maybe the fight you are having (or not having) with your wife or your husband signifies the beginning of the end of your relationship. Maybe your relationship is ending *because you are a bad person*. It's likely, at least in part. Isn't it? Having the argument necessary to solve a real problem therefore necessitates willingness to confront two forms of miserable and dangerous potential simultaneously: chaos (the potential fragility of the relationship—of all relationships—of life itself) and Hell (the fact that you—and your partner—could each be the person bad enough to ruin everything with your laziness and spite). There's every motivation to avoid. But it doesn't help.

Why remain vague, when it renders life stagnant and murky? Well, if you don't know who you are, you can hide in doubt. Maybe you're *not* a bad, careless, worthless person. Who knows? Not you. Particularly if you refuse to think about it—and you have every reason not to. But not thinking about something you don't want to know about doesn't make it go away. You are merely trading specific, particular, pointed knowledge of the likely finite list of your real faults and flaws for a much longer list of undefined potential inadequacies and insufficiencies.

Why refuse to investigate, when knowledge of reality enables mastery of reality (and if not mastery, at least the stature of an honest amateur)? Well,

what if there truly is something rotten in the state of Denmark? Then what? Isn't it better under such conditions to live in willful blindness and enjoy the bliss of ignorance? Well, not if the monster is real! Do you truly think it is a good idea to retreat, to abandon the possibility of arming yourself against the rising sea of troubles, and to thereby diminish yourself in your own eyes? Do you truly think it wise to let the catastrophe grow in the shadows, while you shrink and decrease and become ever more afraid? Isn't it better to prepare, to sharpen your sword, to peer into the darkness, and then to beard the lion in its den? Maybe you'll get hurt. *Probably* you'll get hurt. Life, after all, is suffering. But maybe the wound won't be fatal.

If you wait instead until what you are refusing to investigate comes a-knocking at your door, things will certainly not go so well for you. What you least want will inevitably happen—and when you are least prepared. What you least want to encounter will make itself manifest when you are weakest and it is strongest. And you will be defeated.

> *Turning and turning in the widening gyre*
> *The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*
> *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*
> *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*
> *The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere*
> *The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*
> *The best lack all conviction, while the worst*
> *Are full of passionate intensity.*[164]
> (William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming")

Why refuse to specify, when specifying the problem would enable its solution? Because to specify the problem is to admit that it exists. Because to specify the problem is to allow yourself to know what you want, say, from friend or lover—and then you will know, precisely and cleanly, when you don't get it, and that will hurt, sharply and specifically. But you will learn something from that, and use what you learn in the future—and the alternative to that single sharp pain is the dull ache of continued hopelessness and vague failure and the sense that time, precious time, is slipping by.

Why refuse to specify? Because while you are failing to define success (and thereby rendering it impossible) you are also refusing to define failure, to yourself, so that if and when you fail you won't notice, and it won't hurt. But that won't work! You cannot be fooled so easily—unless you have gone very far down the road! You will instead carry with you a continual sense of

disappointment in your own Being and the self-contempt that comes along with that and the increasing hatred for the world that all of that generates (or degenerates).

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

What if she who has been betrayed, now driven by desperation, is now determined to face all the incoherence of past, present and future? What if she decided to sort through the mess, even though she has avoided doing so until now, and is all the weaker and more confused for it? Perhaps the effort will nearly kill her (but she is now on a path worse than death in any case). To re-emerge, to escape, to be reborn, she must thoughtfully articulate the reality she comfortably but dangerously left hidden behind a veil of ignorance and the pretence of peace. She must separate the particular details of her specific catastrophe from the intolerable general condition of Being, in a world where everything has fallen apart. Everything—that's far too much. It was *specific* things that fell apart, not everything; *identifiable beliefs* failed; *particular actions* were false and inauthentic. What were they? How can they be fixed, now? How can she be better, in the future? She will never return to dry land if she refuses or is unable to figure it all out. She can put the world back together by some precision of thought, some precision of speech, some reliance on her word, some reliance on the Word. But perhaps it's better to leave things in the fog. Perhaps by now there just isn't enough left of her—perhaps too much of her has been left unrevealed, undeveloped. Maybe she simply no longer has the energy.…

Some earlier care and courage and honesty in expression might have saved her from all this trouble. What if she had communicated her unhappiness with

the decline of her romantic life, right when it started to decline? Precisely, exactly, when that decline first bothered her? Or, if it didn't bother her—what if she had instead communicated the fact it didn't bother her as much as it perhaps should have? What if she had clearly and carefully confronted the fact of our husband's contempt for her household efforts? Would she have discovered her resentment of her father and society itself (and the consequent contamination of her relationships)? What if she had fixed all that? How much stronger would she then have become? How much less likely to avoid facing up to difficulties, in consequence? How might she then have served herself, her family, and the world?

What if she had continually and honestly risked conflict in the present, in the service of longer-term truth and peace? What if she had treated the micro-collapses of her marriage as evidence of an underlying instability, eminently worthy of attention, instead of ignoring them, putting up with them, or smiling through them, in such a nice, agreeable manner? Maybe she would be different, and her husband, different too. Maybe they would still be married, formally and in spirit. Maybe they would both be much younger, physically and mentally, than they are now. Maybe her house would have been founded more on rock and less on sand.

When things fall apart, and chaos re-emerges, we can give structure to it, and re-establish order, through our speech. If we speak carefully and precisely, we can sort things out, and put them in their proper place, and set a new goal, and navigate to it—often communally, if we negotiate; if we reach consensus. If we speak carelessly and imprecisely, however, things remain vague. The destination remains unproclaimed. The fog of uncertainty does not lift, and there is no negotiating through the world.

The Construction of Soul and World

The psyche (the soul) and the world are both organized, at the highest levels of human existence, with language, through communication. Things are not as they appear when the outcome has been neither intended nor desired. Being has not been sorted into its proper categories, when it is not behaving. When something goes wrong, even perception itself must be questioned, along with evaluation, thought and action. When error announces itself, undifferentiated chaos is at hand. Its reptilian form paralyzes and confuses.

But dragons, which do exist (perhaps more than anything else exists) also hoard gold. In that collapse into the terrible mess of uncomprehended Being lurks the possibility of new and benevolent order. Clarity of thought—courageous clarity of thought—is necessary to call it forth.

The problem itself must be admitted to, as close to the time of its emergence as possible. “I’m unhappy,” is a good start (not “I have a right to be unhappy,” because that is still questionable, at the beginning of the problem-solving process). Perhaps your unhappiness is justified, under the current circumstances. Perhaps any reasonable person would be displeased and miserable to be where you are. Alternatively, perhaps, you are just whiny and immature? Consider both at least equally probable, as terrible as such consideration might appear. Just exactly how immature might you be? There’s a potentially bottomless pit. But at least you might rectify it, if you can admit to it.

We parse the complex, tangled chaos, and specify the nature of things, including ourselves. It is in this way that our creative, communicative exploration continually generates and regenerates the world. We are shaped and informed by what we voluntarily encounter, and we shape what we inhabit, as well, in that encounter. This is difficult, but the difficulty is not relevant, because the alternative is worse.

Maybe our errant husband ignored the dinner conversation of his wife because he hated his job and was tired and resentful. Maybe he hated his job because his career was forced on him by his father and he was too weak or “loyal” to object. Maybe she put up with his lack of attention because she believed that forthright objection itself was rude and immoral. Maybe she hated her own father’s anger and decided, when very young, that all aggression and assertiveness were morally wrong. Maybe she thought her husband wouldn’t love her if she had any opinions of her own. It is very difficult to put such things in order—but damaged machinery will continue to malfunction if its problems are neither diagnosed nor fixed.

Wheat from Chaff

Precision specifies. When something terrible happens, it is precision that separates the unique terrible thing that has actually happened from all the other, equally terrible things that might have happened—but did not. If you

wake up in pain, you might be dying. You might be dying slowly and terribly from one of a diverse number of painful, horrible diseases. If you refuse to tell your doctor about your pain, then what you have is unspecified: it could be *any* of those diseases—and it certainly (since you have avoided the diagnostic conversation—the act of articulation) is something unspeakable. But if you talk to your doctor, all those terrible possible diseases will collapse, with luck, into just one terrible (or not so terrible) disease, or even into nothing. Then you can laugh at your previous fears, and if something really is wrong, well, you're prepared. Precision may leave the tragedy intact, but it chases away the ghouls and the demons.

What you hear in the forest but cannot see might be a tiger. It might even be a conspiracy of tigers, each hungrier and more vicious than the other, led by a crocodile. But it might not be, too. If you turn and look, perhaps you'll see that it's just a squirrel. (I know someone who was actually chased by a squirrel.) Something is out there in the woods. You know that with certainty. But often it's only a squirrel. If you refuse to look, however, then it's a dragon, and you're no knight: you're a mouse confronting a lion; a rabbit, paralyzed by the gaze of a wolf. And I am not saying that it's always a squirrel. Often it's something truly terrible. But even what is terrible in actuality often pales in significance compared to what is terrible in imagination. And often what cannot be confronted because of its horror in imagination can in fact be confronted when reduced to its-still-admittedly-terrible actuality.

If you shirk the responsibility of confronting the unexpected, even when it appears in manageable doses, reality itself will become unsustainably disorganized and chaotic. Then it will grow bigger and swallow all order, all sense, and all predictability. Ignored reality transforms itself (reverts back) into the great Goddess of Chaos, the great reptilian Monster of the Unknown—the great predatory beast against which mankind has struggled since the dawn of time. If the gap between pretence and reality goes unmentioned, it will widen, you will fall into it, and the consequences will not be good. Ignored reality manifests itself in an abyss of confusion and suffering.

Be careful with what you tell yourself and others about what you have done, what you are doing, and where you are going. Search for the correct words. Organize those words into the correct sentences, and those sentences into the correct paragraphs. The past can be redeemed, when reduced by

precise language to its essence. The present can flow by without robbing the future if its realities are spoken out clearly. With careful thought and language, the singular, stellar destiny that justifies existence can be extracted from the multitude of murky and unpleasant futures that are far more likely to manifest themselves of their own accord. This is how the Eye and the Word make habitable order.

Don’t hide baby monsters under the carpet. They will flourish. They will grow large in the dark. Then, when you least expect it, they will jump out and devour you. You will descend into an indeterminate, confusing hell, instead of ascending into the heaven of virtue and clarity. Courageous and truthful words will render your reality simple, pristine, well-defined and habitable.

If you identify things, with careful attention and language, you bring them forward as viable, obedient objects, detaching them from their underlying near-universal interconnectedness. You simplify them. You make them specific and useful, and reduce their complexity. You make it possible to live with them and use them without dying from that complexity, with its attendant uncertainty and anxiety. If you leave things vague, then you’ll never know what is one thing and what is another. Everything will bleed into everything else. This makes the world too complex to be managed.

You have to consciously define the topic of a conversation, particularly when it is difficult—or it becomes about everything, and everything is too much. This is so frequently why couples cease communicating. Every argument degenerates into every problem that ever emerged in the past, every problem that exists now, and every terrible thing that is likely to happen in the future. No one can have a discussion about “everything.” Instead, you can say, “This exact, precise thing—that is what is making me unhappy. This exact, precise thing—that is what I want, as an alternative (although I am open to suggestions, if they are specific). This exact, precise thing—that is what you could deliver, so that I will stop making your life and mine miserable.” But to do that, you have to *think*: What is wrong, *exactly*? What do I want, *exactly*? You must speak forthrightly and call forth the habitable world from chaos. You must use honest precise speech to do that. If instead you shrink away and hide, what you are hiding from will transform itself into the giant dragon that lurks under your bed and in your forest and in the dark recesses of your mind—and it will devour you.

You must determine where you have been in your life, so that you can

know where you are now. If you don't know where you are, precisely, then you could be anywhere. Anywhere is too many places to be, and some of those places are very bad. You must determine where you have been in your life, because otherwise you can't get to where you're going. You can't get from point A to point B unless you are already at point A, and if you're just "anywhere" the chances you are at point A are very small indeed.

You must determine where you are going in your life, because you cannot get there unless you move in that direction. Random wandering will not move you forward. It will instead disappoint and frustrate you and make you anxious and unhappy and hard to get along with (and then resentful, and then vengeful, and then worse).

Say what you mean, so that you can find out what you mean. Act out what you say, so you can find out what happens. Then pay attention. Note your errors. Articulate them. Strive to correct them. That is how you discover the meaning of your life. That will protect you from the tragedy of your life. How could it be otherwise?

Confront the chaos of Being. Take aim against a sea of troubles. Specify your destination, and chart your course. Admit to what you want. Tell those around you who you are. Narrow, and gaze attentively, and move forward, forthrightly.

Be precise in your speech.

RULE 11

DO NOT BOTHER CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE SKATEBOARDING

DANGER AND MASTERY

There was a time when kids skateboarded on the west side of Sidney Smith Hall, at the University of Toronto, where I work. Sometimes I stood there and watched them. There are rough, wide, shallow concrete steps there, leading up from the street to the front entrance, accompanied by tubular iron handrails, about two and a half inches in diameter and twenty feet long. The crazy kids, almost always boys, would pull back about fifteen yards from the top of the steps. Then they would place a foot on their boards, and skate like mad to get up some speed. Just before they collided with the handrail, they would reach down, grab their board with a single hand and jump onto the top of the rail, boardsliding their way down its length, propelling themselves off and landing—sometimes, gracefully, still atop their boards, sometimes, painfully, off them. Either way, they were soon back at it.

Some might call that stupid. Maybe it was. But it was brave, too. I thought those kids were amazing. I thought they deserved a pat on the back and some honest admiration. Of course it was dangerous. Danger was the point. They wanted to triumph over danger. They would have been safer in protective equipment, but that would have ruined it. They weren't trying to be safe. They were trying to become competent—and it's competence that makes people as safe as they can truly be.

I wouldn't dare do what those kids were doing. Not only that, I couldn't. I certainly couldn't climb a construction crane, like a certain type of modern daredevil, evident on YouTube (and, of course, people who work on construction cranes). I don't like heights, although the twenty-five thousand feet to which airliners ascend is so high that it doesn't bother me. I have flown several times in a carbon fibre stunt plane—even doing a hammerhead roll—and that was OK, although it's very physically and mentally

demanding. (To perform a hammerhead roll, you pilot the plane straight up vertically, until the force of gravity makes it stall. Then it falls backwards, corkscrewing, until eventually it flips and noses straight down, after which you pull out of the dive. Or you don't do another hammerhead roll.) But I can't skateboard—especially down handrails—and I can't climb cranes.

Sidney Smith Hall faces another street on the east side. Along that street, named St. George—ironically enough—the university installed a series of rough, hard-edged, concrete plant boxes, sloping down to the roadway. The kids used to go out there, too, and boardslide along the box edges, as they did along the concrete surround of a sculpture adjacent to the building. That didn't last very long. Little steel brackets known as "skatestoppers" soon appeared, every two or three feet, along those edges. When I first saw them, I remembered something that happened in Toronto several years previously. Two weeks before elementary school classes started, throughout the city, all the playground equipment disappeared. The legislation governing such things had changed, and there was a panic about insurability. The playgrounds were hastily removed, even though they were sufficiently safe, grandfathered re their insurability, and often paid for (and quite recently) by parents. This meant no playgrounds at all for more than a year. During this time, I often saw bored but admirable kids charging around on the roof of our local school. It was that or scrounge about in the dirt with the cats and the less adventurous children.

I say "sufficiently safe" about the demolished playgrounds because when playgrounds are made too safe, kids either stop playing in them or start playing in unintended ways. Kids need playgrounds dangerous enough to remain challenging. People, including children (who are people too, after all) don't seek to minimize risk. They seek to optimize it. They drive and walk and love and play so that they achieve what they desire, but they push themselves a bit at the same time, too, so they continue to develop. Thus, if things are made too safe, people (including children) start to figure out ways to make them dangerous again.[165]

When untrammeled—and encouraged—we prefer to live on the edge. There, we can still be both confident in our experience and confronting the chaos that helps us develop. We're hard-wired, for that reason, to enjoy risk (some of us more than others). We feel invigorated and excited when we

work to optimize our future performance, while playing in the present. Otherwise we lumber around, sloth-like, unconscious, unformed and careless. Overprotected, we will fail when something dangerous, unexpected and full of opportunity suddenly makes its appearance, as it inevitably will.

The skatestoppers are unattractive. The surround of the nearby sculpture would have to have been badly damaged by diligent boardsliders before it would look as mean as it does now, studded with metal like a pit bull's collar. The large plant boxes have metal guards placed at irregular intervals across their tops, and this, in addition to the wear caused by the skateboarders, produces a dismal impression of poor design, resentment and badly executed afterthoughts. It gives the area, which was supposed to be beautified by the sculpture and vegetation, a generic industrial/prison/mental institution/work-camp look of the kind that appears when builders and public officials do not like or trust the people they serve.

The sheer harsh ugliness of the solution makes a lie of the reasons for its implementation.

Success and Resentment

If you read the depth psychologists—Freud and Jung, for example, as well as their precursor, Friedrich Nietzsche—you learn that there is a dark side to everything. Freud delved deeply into the latent, implicit content of dreams, which were often aimed, in his opinion, at the expression of some improper wish. Jung believed that every act of social propriety was accompanied by its evil twin, its unconscious shadow. Nietzsche investigated the role played by what he termed *ressentiment* in motivating what were ostensibly selfless actions—and, often, exhibited all too publicly.[166]

> For that man be delivered from revenge—that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms. The tarantulas, of course, would have it otherwise. "What justice means to us is precisely that the world be filled with the storms of our revenge"—thus they speak to each other. "We shall wreak vengeange and abuse on all whose equals we are not"—thus do the tarantula-hearts vow. "And 'will to equality' shall henceforth be the name for virtue; and against all that has power we want to raise our clamor!" You preachers of equality, the tyrant-mania of impotence clamors thus out of you for equality: your most secret ambitions to be tyrants thus shroud themselves in words of virtue.

The incomparable English essayist George Orwell knew this sort of thing well. In 1937, he wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which was in part a scathing

attack on upper-class British socialists (this, despite being inclined towards socialism himself). In the first half of this book, Orwell portrays the appalling conditions faced by UK miners in the 1930s:[167]

> Several dentists have told me that in industrial districts a person over thirty with any of his or her own teeth is coming to be an abnormality. In Wigan various people gave me their opinion that it is best to get shut of your teeth as early in life as possible. 'Teeth is just a misery,' one woman said to me.

A Wigan Pier coal miner had to walk—crawl would be a better word, given the height of the mine shafts—up to three miles, underground, in the dark, banging his head and scraping his back, just to get to his seven-and-a-half-hour shift of backbreaking work. After that, he crawled back. "It is comparable, perhaps, to climbing a smallish mountain before and after your day's work," stated Orwell. None of the time spent crawling was paid.

Orwell wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier* for the Left Book Club, a socialist publishing group that released a select volume every month. After reading the first half of his book, which deals directly with the miners' personal circumstances, it is impossible not to feel sympathy for the working poor. Only a monster could keep his heart hardened through the accounts of the lives Orwell describes:

> It is not long since conditions in the mines were worse than they are now. There are still living a few very old women who in their youth have worked underground, crawling on all fours and dragging tubs of coal. They used to go on doing this even when they were pregnant.

In book's second half, however, Orwell turned his gaze to a different problem: the comparative unpopularity of socialism in the UK at the time, despite the clear and painful inequity observable everywhere. He concluded that the tweed-wearing, armchair-philosophizing, victim-identifying, pity-and-contempt-dispensing social-reformer types frequently did not like the poor, as they claimed. *Instead, they just hated the rich*. They disguised their resentment and jealousy with piety, sanctimony and self-righteousness. Things in the unconscious—or on the social justice–dispensing leftist front—haven't changed much, today. It is because of of Freud, Jung, Nietzsche—and Orwell—that I always wonder, "What, then, do you stand against?" whenever I hear someone say, too loudly, "I stand for this!" The question seems particularly relevant if the same someone is complaining, criticizing, or trying to change someone else's behaviour.

I believe it was Jung who developed the most surgically wicked of psychoanalytic dicta: *if you cannot understand why someone did something, look at the consequences—and infer the motivation.* This is a psychological scalpel. It's not always a suitable instrument. It can cut too deeply, or in the wrong places. It is, perhaps, a last-resort option. Nonetheless, there are times when its application proves enlightening.

If the consequences of placing skatestoppers on plant-boxes and sculpture bases, for example, is unhappy adolescent males and brutalist aesthetic disregard of beauty then, perhaps, that was the aim. When someone claims to be acting from the highest principles, for the good of others, there is no reason to assume that the person's motives are genuine. People motivated to make things better usually aren't concerned with changing other people—or, if they are, they take responsibility for making the same changes to themselves (and first). Beneath the production of rules stopping the skateboarders from doing highly skilled, courageous and dangerous things I see the operation of an insidious and profoundly anti-human spirit.

More about Chris

My friend Chris, whom I wrote about earlier, was possessed by such a spirit—to the serious detriment of his mental health. Part of what plagued him was guilt. He attended elementary and junior high school in a number of towns, up in the frigid expanses of the northernmost Alberta prairie, prior to ending up in the Fairview I wrote about earlier. Fights with Native kids were a too-common part of his experience, during those moves. It's no overstatement to point out that such kids were, on average, rougher than the white kids, or that they were touchier (and they had their reasons). I knew this well from my own experience.

I had a rocky friendship with a Métis kid, Rene Heck,[fn1] when I was in elementary school. It was rocky because the situation was complex. There was a large cultural divide between Rene and me. His clothes were dirtier. He was rougher in speech and attitude. I had skipped a grade in school, and was, in addition, small for my age. Rene was a big, smart, good-looking kid, and he was tough. We were in grade six together, in a class taught by my father. Rene was caught chewing gum. "Rene," said my father, "spit that gum out. You look like a cow." "Ha, ha," I laughed, under my breath. "Rene the cow."

Rene might have been a cow, but there was nothing wrong with his hearing. “Peterson,” he said, “after school—you’re dead.”

Earlier in the morning, Rene and I had arranged to see a movie that night at the local movie theatre, the Gem. It looked like that was off. In any case, the rest of the day passed, quickly and unpleasantly, as it does when threat and pain lurk. Rene was more than capable of giving me a good pounding. After school, I took off for the bike stands outside the school as fast as I could, but Rene beat me there. We circled around the bikes, him on one side, me on the other. We were characters in a “Keystone Cops” short. As long as I kept circling, he couldn’t catch me, but my strategy couldn’t work forever. I yelled out that I was sorry, but he wasn’t mollified. His pride was hurt, and he wanted me to pay.

I crouched down and hid behind some bikes, keeping an eye on Rene. “Rene,” I yelled, “I’m sorry I called you a cow. Let’s quit fighting.” He started to approach me again. I said, “Rene, I am sorry I said that. Really. And I still want to go to the movie with you.” This wasn’t just a tactic. I meant it. Otherwise what happened next would not have happened. Rene stopped circling. Then he stared at me. Then he broke into tears. Then he ran off. That was Native-white relationships in a nutshell, in our hard little town. We never did go to a movie together.

When my friend Chris got into it with Native kids, he wouldn’t fight back. He didn’t feel that his self-defence was morally justified, so he took his beatings. “We took their land,” he later wrote. “That was wrong. No wonder they’re angry.” Over time, step by step, Chris withdrew from the world. It was partly his guilt. He developed a deep hatred for masculinity and masculine activity. He saw going to school or working or finding a girlfriend as part of the same process that had led to the colonization of North America, the horrible nuclear stalemate of the cold war, and the despoiling of the planet. He had read some books about Buddhism, and felt that negation of his own Being was ethically required, in the light of the current world situation. He came to believe that the same applied to others.

When I was an undergraduate, Chris was, for a while, one of my roommates. One late night we went to a local bar. We walked home, afterward. He started to snap the side-view mirrors off parked cars, one after the other. I said, “Quit that, Chris. What possible good is it going to do to make the people who own these cars miserable?” He told me that they were

all part of the frenetic human activity that was ruining everything, and that they deserved whatever they got. I said that taking revenge on people who were just living normal lives was not going to help anything.

Years later, when I was in graduate school in Montreal, Chris showed up, for what was supposed to be a visit. He was aimless, however, and lost. He asked if I could help. He ended up moving in. I was married by then, living with my wife, Tammy, and our year-old daughter, Mikhaila. Chris had also been friends with Tammy back in Fairview (and held out hopes of more than friendship). That complicated the situation even more—but not precisely in the manner you might think. Chris started by hating men, but he ended by hating women. He wanted them, but he had rejected education, and career, and desire. He smoked heavily, and was unemployed. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he was not of much interest to women. That made him bitter. I tried to convince him that the path he had chosen was only going to lead to further ruin. He needed to develop some humility. He needed to get a life.

One evening, it was Chris's turn to make dinner. When my wife came home, the apartment was filled with smoke. Hamburgers were burning furiously in the frying pan. Chris was on his hands and knees, attempting to repair something that had come loose on the legs of the stove. My wife knew his tricks. She knew he was burning dinner on purpose. He resented having to make it. He resented the feminine role (even though the household duties were split in a reasonable manner; even though he knew that perfectly well). He was fixing the stove to provide a plausible, even creditable excuse for burning the food. When she pointed out what he was doing, he played the victim, but he was deeply and dangerously furious. Part of him, and not the good part, was convinced that he was smarter than anyone else. It was a blow to his pride that she could see through his tricks. It was an ugly situation.

Tammy and I took a walk up towards a local park the next day. We needed to get away from the apartment, although it was thirty-five below—bitterly, frigidly cold, humid and foggy. It was windy. It was hostile to life. Living with Chris was too much, Tammy said. We entered the park. The trees forked their bare branches upward through the damp grey air. A black squirrel, tail hairless from mange, gripped a leafless branch, shivered violently, struggling to hold on against the wind. What was it doing out there in the cold? Squirrels are partial hibernators. They only come out in the winter when it's warm. Then we saw another, and another, and another, and another, and

another. There were squirrels all around us in the park, all partially hairless, tails and bodies alike, all windblown on their branches, all shaking and freezing in the deathly cold. No one else was around. It was impossible. It was inexplicable. It was exactly appropriate. We were on the stage of an absurdist play. It was directed by God. Tammy left soon after with our daughter for a few days elsewhere.

Near Christmas time, that same year, my younger brother and his new wife came out to visit from western Canada. My brother also knew Chris. They all put on their winter clothes in preparation for a walk around downtown Montreal. Chris put on a long dark winter coat. He pulled a black toque, a brimless knitted cap, far down over his head. His coat was black, as were his pants and boots. He was very tall, and thin, and somewhat stooped. "Chris," I joked. "You look like a serial killer." Ha bloody ha. The three came back from their walk. Chris was out of sorts. There were strangers in his territory. Another happy couple. It was salt in his wounds.

We had dinner, pleasantly enough. We talked, and ended the evening. But I couldn't sleep. Something wasn't right. It was in the air. At four in the morning, I had had enough. I crawled out of bed. I knocked quietly on Chris's door and went without waiting for an answer into his room. He was awake on the bed, staring at the ceiling, as I knew he would be. I sat down beside him. I knew him very well. I talked him down from his murderous rage. Then I went back to bed, and slept. The next morning my brother pulled me aside. He wanted to speak with me. We sat down. He said, "What the hell was going on last night? I couldn't sleep at all. Was something wrong?" I told my brother that Chris wasn't doing so well. I didn't tell him that he was lucky to be alive—that we all were. The spirit of Cain had visited our house, but we were left unscathed.

Maybe I picked up some change in scent that night, when death hung in the air. Chris had a very bitter odour. He showered frequently, but the towels and the sheets picked up the smell. It was impossible to get them clean. It was the product of a psyche and a body that did not operate harmoniously. A social worker I knew, who also knew Chris, told me of her familiarity with that odour. Everyone at her workplace knew of it, although they only discussed it in hushed tones. They called it the smell of the unemployable.

Soon after this I finished my post-doctoral studies. Tammy and I moved away from Montreal to Boston. We had our second baby. Now and then,

Chris and I talked on the phone. He came to visit once. It went well. He had found a job at an auto-parts place. He was trying to make things better. He was OK at that point. But it didn't last. I didn't see him in Boston again. Almost ten years later—the night before Chris's fortieth birthday, as it happened—he called me again. By this time, I had moved my family to Toronto. He had some news. A story he had written was going to be published in a collection put together by a small but legitimate press. He wanted to tell me that. He wrote good short stories. I had read them all. We had discussed them at length. He was a good photographer, too. He had a good, creative eye. The next day, Chris drove his old pickup—the same battered beast from Fairview—into the bush. He ran a hose from the exhaust pipe into the front cab. I can see him there, looking through the cracked windshield, smoking, waiting. They found his body a few weeks later. I called his dad. "My beautiful boy," he sobbed.

Recently, I was invited to give a TEDx talk at a nearby university. Another professor talked first. He had been invited to speak because of his work—his genuinely fascinating, technical work—with computationally intelligent surfaces (like computer touchscreens, but capable of being placed everywhere). He spoke instead about the threat human beings posed to the survival of the planet. Like Chris—like far too many people—he had become anti-human, to the core. He had not walked as far down that road as my friend, but the same dread spirit animated them both.

He stood in front of a screen displaying an endless slow pan of a blocks-long Chinese high-tech factory. Hundreds of white-suited workers stood like sterile, inhuman robots behind their assembly lines, soundlessly inserting piece A into slot B. He told the audience—filled with bright young people—of the decision he and his wife had made to limit their number of children to one. He told them it was something they should all consider, if they wanted to regard themselves as ethical people. I felt that such a decision was properly considered—but only in his particular case (where less than one might have been even better). The many Chinese students in attendance sat stolidly through his moralizing. They thought, perhaps, of their parents' escape from the horrors of Mao's Cultural Revolution and its one-child policy. They thought, perhaps, of the vast improvement in living standard and freedom provided by the very same factories. A couple of them said as much in the question period that followed.

Would have the professor reconsidered his opinions, if he knew where such ideas can lead? I would like to say yes, but I don't believe it. I think he could have known, but refused to. Worse, perhaps: he knew, but didn't care—or knew, and was headed there, voluntarily, in any case.

Self-Appointed Judges of the Human Race

It has not been long since the Earth seemed infinitely larger than the people who inhabited it. It was only in the late 1800s that the brilliant biologist Thomas Huxley (1825-95)—staunch defender of Darwin and Aldous Huxley's grandfather—told the British Parliament that it was literally impossible for mankind to exhaust the oceans. Their power of generation was simply too great, as far as he could determine, compared to even the most assiduous human predations. It's been an even shorter fifty years since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* ignited the environmental movement.[168] Fifty years! That's nothing! That's not even yesterday.

We've only just developed the conceptual tools and technologies that allow us to understand the web of life, however imperfectly. We deserve a bit of sympathy, in consequence, for the hypothetical outrage of our destructive behaviour. Sometimes we don't know any better. Sometimes we do know better, but haven't yet formulated any practical alternatives. It's not as if life is easy for human beings, after all, even now—and it's only a few decades ago that the majority of human beings were starving, diseased and illiterate.[169] Wealthy as we are (increasingly, everywhere) we still only live decades that can be counted on our fingers. Even at present, it is the rare and fortunate family that does not contain at least one member with a serious illness—and all will face that problem eventually. We do what we can to make the best of things, in our vulnerability and fragility, and the planet is harder on us than we are on it. We could cut ourselves some slack.

Human beings are, after all, seriously remarkable creatures. We have no peers, and it's not clear that we have any real limits. Things happen now that appeared humanly impossible even at the same time in the recent past when we began to wake up to our planet-sized responsibilities. A few weeks before writing this I happened across two videos juxtaposed on YouTube. One showed the Olympic gold medal vault from 1956; the other, the Olympic silver medal vault from 2012. It didn't even look like the same sport—or the

same animal. What McKayla Maroney did in 2012 would have been considered superhuman in the fifties. Parkour, a sport derived from French military obstacle course training, is amazing, as is free running. I watch compilations of such performances with unabashed admiration. Some of the kids jump off three-storey buildings without injury. It's dangerous—and amazing. Crane climbers are so brave it rattles the mind. The same goes for extreme mountain bikers, freestyle snowboarders, surfers of fifty-foot waves, and skateboarders.

The boys who shot up Columbine High School, whom we discussed earlier, had appointed themselves judges of the human race—like the TEDx professor, although much more extreme; like Chris, my doomed friend. For Eric Harris, the more literate of the two killers, human beings were a failed and corrupt species. Once a presupposition such as that is accepted, its inner logic will inevitably manifest itself. If something is a plague, as David Attenborough has it,[170] or a cancer, as the Club of Rome claimed,[171] the person who eradicates it is a hero—a veritable planetary saviour, in this case. A real messiah might follow through with his rigorous moral logic, and eliminate himself, as well. This is what mass murderers, driven by near-infinite resentment, typically do. Even their own Being does not justify the existence of humanity. In fact, they kill themselves precisely to demonstrate the purity of their commitment to annihilation. No one in the modern world may without objection express the opinion that existence would be bettered by the absence of Jews, blacks, Muslims, or Englishmen. Why, then, is it virtuous to propose that the planet might be better off, if there were fewer people on it? I can't help but see a skeletal, grinning face, gleeful at the possibility of the apocalypse, hiding not so very far behind such statements. And why does it so often seem to be the very people standing so visibly against prejudice who so often appear to feel obligated to denounce humanity itself?

I have seen university students, particularly those in the humanities, suffer genuine declines in their mental health from being philosophically berated by such defenders of the planet for their existence as members of the human species. It's worse, I think, for young men. As privileged beneficiaries of the patriarchy, their accomplishments are considered unearned. As possible adherents of rape culture, they're sexually suspect. Their ambitions make

them plunderers of the planet. They’re not welcome. At the junior high, high school and university level, they’re falling behind educationally. When my son was fourteen, we discussed his grades. He was doing very well, he said, matter-of-factly, for a boy. I inquired further. Everyone knew, he said, that girls do better in school than boys. His intonation indicated surprise at my ignorance of something so self-evident. While writing this, I received the latest edition of *The Economist*. The cover story? “The Weaker Sex”—meaning males. In modern universities women now make up more than 50 percent of the students in more than two-thirds of all disciplines.

Boys are suffering, in the modern world. They are more disobedient—negatively—or more independent—positively—than girls, and they suffer for this, throughout their pre-university educational career. They are less agreeable (agreeableness being a personality trait associated with compassion, empathy and avoidance of conflict) and less susceptible to anxiety and depression,[172] at least after both sexes hit puberty.[173] Boys’ interests tilt towards things; girls’ interests tilt towards people.[174] Strikingly, these differences, strongly influenced by biological factors, are most pronounced in the Scandinavian societies where gender-equality has been pushed hardest: this is the opposite of what would be expected by those who insist, ever more loudly, that gender is a social construct. It isn’t. This isn’t a debate. The data are in.[175]

Boys like competition, and they don’t like to obey, particularly when they are adolescents. During that time, they are driven to escape their families, and establish their own independent existence. There is little difference between doing that and challenging authority. Schools, which were set up in the late 1800s precisely to inculcate obedience,[176] do not take kindly to provocative and daring behaviour, no matter how tough-minded and competent it might show a boy (or a girl) to be. Other factors play their role in the decline of boys. Girls will, for example, play boys’ games, but boys are much more reluctant to play girls’ games. This is in part because it is admirable for a girl to win when competing with a boy. It is also OK for her to lose to a boy. For a boy to beat a girl, however, it is often not OK—and just as often, it is even less OK for him to lose. Imagine that a boy and a girl, aged nine, get into a fight. Just for engaging, the boy is highly suspect. If he wins, he’s pathetic. If he loses—well, his life might as well be over. Beat up by a girl.

Girls can win by winning in their own hierarchy—by being good at what girls value, as girls. They can add to this victory by winning in the boys' hierarchy. Boys, however, can only win by winning in the male hierarchy. They will lose status, among girls *and* boys, by being good at what girls value. It costs them in reputation among the boys, and in attractiveness among the girls. Girls aren't attracted to boys who are their friends, even though they might like them, whatever that means. They are attracted to boys who win status contests with other boys. If you're male, however, you just can't hammer a female as hard as you would a male. Boys can't (won't) play truly competitive games with girls. It isn't clear how they can win. As the game turns into a girls' game, therefore, the boys leave. Are the universities —particularly the humanities—about to become a girls' game? Is this what we want?

The situation in the universities (and in educational institutions in general) is far more problematic than the basic statistics indicate.[177] If you eliminate the so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programs (excluding psychology), the female/male ratio is even more skewed.[178] Almost 80 percent of students majoring in the fields of healthcare, public administration, psychology and education, which comprise one-quarter of all degrees, are female. The disparity is still rapidly increasing. At this rate, there will be very few men in most university disciplines in fifteen years. This is not good news for men. It might even be catastrophic news for men. But it's also not good news for women.

Career and Marriage

The women at female-dominated institutes of higher education are finding it increasingly difficult to arrange a dating relationship of even moderate duration. In consequence, they must settle, if inclined, for a hook-up, or sequential hook-ups. Perhaps this is a move forward, in terms of sexual liberation, but I doubt it. I think it's terrible for the girls.[179] A stable, loving relationship is highly desirable, for men as well as women. For women, however, it is often what is most wanted. From 1997 to 2012, according to the Pew Research Centre,[180] the number of women aged 18 to 34 who said that a successful marriage is one of the most important things in life rose

from 28 to 37 percent (an increase of more than 30 percent[fn2]). The number of young men who said the same thing declined 15 percent over the same period (from 35 to 29 percent[fn3]). During that time, the proportion of married people over 18 continued to decline, down from three-quarters in 1960 to half now.[181] Finally, among never-married adults aged 30 to 59, men are three times as likely as women to say they do not ever want to marry (27 vs 8 percent).

Who decided, anyway, that career is more important than love and family? Is working eighty hours a week at a high-end law firm truly worth the sacrifices required for that kind of success? And if it is worth it, why is it worth it? A minority of people (mostly men, who score low in the trait of agreeableness, again) are hyper-competitive, and want to win at any cost. A minority will find the work intrinsically fascinating. But most aren't, and most won't, and money doesn't seem to improve people's lives, once they have enough to avoid the bill collectors. Furthermore, most high-performing and high-earning females have high-performing and high-earning partners—and that matters more to women. The Pew data also indicate that a spouse with a desirable job is a high priority for almost 80 percent of never-married but marriage-seeking women (but for less than 50 percent of men).

When they hit their thirties, most of the top-rate female lawyers bail out of their high-pressure careers.[182] Only 15 percent of equity partners at the two hundred biggest US law firms are women.[183] This figure hasn't changed much in the last fifteen years, even though female associates and staff attorneys are plentiful. It also isn't because the law firms don't want the women to stay around and succeed. There is a chronic shortage of excellent people, regardless of sex, and law firms are desperate to retain them.

The women who leave want a job—and a life—that allows them some time. After law school and articling and the few first years of work, they develop other interests. This is common knowledge in the big firms (although it is not something that people are comfortable articulating in public, men and women alike). I recently watched a McGill University professor, female, lecture a room full of female law partners or near-partners about how lack of childcare facilities and "male definitions of success" impeded their career progress and caused women to leave. I knew most of the women in the room. We had talked at great length. I knew they knew that none of this was at all

the problem. They had nannies, and they could afford them. They had already outsourced all their domestic obligations and necessities. They understood, as well—and perfectly well—that it was the market that defined success, not the men they worked with. If you are earning $650 an hour in Toronto as a top lawyer, and your client in Japan phones you at 4 a.m. on a Sunday, you answer. Now. You answer, now, even if you have just gone back to sleep after feeding the baby. You answer because some hyper-ambitious legal associate in New York would be happy to answer, if you don't—and that's why the market defines the work.

The increasingly short supply of university-educated men poses a problem of increasing severity for women who want to marry, as well as date. First, women have a strong proclivity to marry across or up the economic dominance hierarchy. They prefer a partner of equal or greater status. This holds true cross-culturally.[184] The same does not hold, by the way, for men, who are perfectly willing to marry across or down (as the Pew data indicate), although they show a preference for somewhat younger mates. The recent trend towards the hollowing-out of the middle class has also been increasing as resource-rich women tend more and more[185] to partner with resource-rich men. Because of this, and because of the decline in high-paying manufacturing jobs for men (one of six men of employable age is currently without work in the US), marriage is now something increasingly reserved for the rich. I can't help finding that amusing, in a blackly ironic manner. The oppressive patriarchal institution of marriage has now become a luxury. Why would the rich tyrannize themselves?

Why do women want an employed partner and, preferably, one of higher status? In no small part, it's because women become more vulnerable when they have children. They need someone competent to support mother and child when that becomes necessary. It's a perfectly rational compensatory act, although it may also have a biological basis. Why would a woman who decides to take responsibility for one or more infants want an adult to look after as well? So, the unemployed working man is an undesirable specimen—and single motherhood an undesirable alternative. Children in father-absent homes are four times as likely to be poor. That means their mothers are poor too. Fatherless children are at much greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse. Children living with married biological parents are less anxious, depressed

and delinquent than children living with one or more non-biological parent. Children in single-parent families are also twice as likely to commit suicide.[186]

The strong turn towards political correctness in universities has exacerbated the problem. The voices shouting against oppression have become louder, it seems, in precise proportion to how equal—even now increasingly skewed against men—the schools have become. There are whole disciplines in universities forthrightly hostile towards men. These are the areas of study, dominated by the postmodern/neo-Marxist claim that Western culture, in particular, is an oppressive structure, created by white men to dominate and exclude women (and other select groups); successful only because of that domination and exclusion.[187]

The Patriarchy: Help or Hindrance?

Of course, culture *is* an oppressive structure. *It's always been that way*. It's a fundamental, universal existential reality. The tyrannical king is a symbolic truth; an archetypal constant. What we inherit from the past is willfully blind, and out of date. It's a ghost, a machine, and a monster. It must be rescued, repaired and kept at bay by the attention and effort of the living. It crushes, as it hammers us into socially acceptable shape, and it wastes great potential. But it offers great gain, too. Every word we speak is a gift from our ancestors. Every thought we think was thought previously by someone smarter. The highly functional infrastructure that surrounds us, particularly in the West, is a gift from our ancestors: the comparatively uncorrupt political and economic systems, the technology, the wealth, the lifespan, the freedom, the luxury, and the opportunity. Culture takes with one hand, but in some fortunate places it gives more with the other. To think about culture only as oppressive is ignorant and ungrateful, as well as dangerous. This is not to say (as I am hoping the content of this book has made abundantly clear, so far) that culture should not be subject to criticism.

Consider this, as well, in regard to oppression: *any hierarchy creates winners and losers*. The winners are, of course, more likely to justify the hierarchy and the losers to criticize it. But (1) the collective pursuit of any valued goal produces a hierarchy (as some will be better and some worse at that pursuit not matter what it is) and (2) it is the pursuit of goals that in large

part lends life its sustaining meaning. We experience almost all the emotions that make life deep and engaging as a consequence of moving successfully towards something deeply desired and valued. The price we pay for that involvement is the inevitable creation of hierarchies of success, while the inevitable consequence is difference in outcome. Absolute equality would therefore require the sacrifice of value itself—and then there would be nothing worth living for. We might instead note with gratitude that a complex, sophisticated culture allows for many games and many successful players, and that a well-structured culture allows the individuals that compose it to play and to win, in many different fashions.

It is also *perverse* to consider culture the creation of men. Culture is symbolically, archetypally, mythically male. That's partly why the idea of "the patriarchy" is so easily swallowed. But it is certainly the creation of humankind, not the creation of men (let alone white men, who nonetheless contributed their fair share). European culture has only been dominant, to the degree that it is dominant at all, for about four hundred years. On the time scale of cultural evolution—which is to be measured, at minimum, in thousands of years—such a timespan barely registers. Furthermore, even if women contributed nothing substantial to art, literature and the sciences prior to the 1960s and the feminist revolution (which is not something I believe), then the role they played raising children and working on the farms was still instrumental in raising boys and freeing up men—a very few men—so that humanity could propagate itself and strive forward.

Here's an alternative theory: throughout history, men and women both struggled terribly for freedom from the overwhelming horrors of privation and necessity. Women were often at a disadvantage during that struggle, as they had all the vulnerabilities of men, with the extra reproductive burden, and less physical strength. In addition to the filth, misery, disease, starvation, cruelty and ignorance that characterized the lives of both sexes, back before the twentieth century (when even people in the Western world typically existed on less than a dollar a day in today's money) women also had to put up with the serious practical inconvenience of menstruation, the high probability of unwanted pregnancy, the chance of death or serious damage during childbirth, and the burden of too many young children. Perhaps that is sufficient reason for the different legal and practical treatment of men and women that characterized most societies prior to the recent technological

revolutions, including the invention of the birth control pill. At least such things might be taken into account, before the assumption that men tyrannized women is accepted as a truism.

It looks to me like the so-called oppression of the patriarchy was instead an imperfect collective attempt by men and women, stretching over millennia, to free each other from privation, disease and drudgery. The recent case of Arunachalam Muruganantham provides a salutary example. This man, the "tampon king" of India, became unhappy because his wife had to use dirty rags during her menstrual period. She told him it was either expensive sanitary napkins, or milk for the family. He spent the next fourteen years in a state of insanity, by his neighbours' judgment, trying to rectify the problem. Even his wife and his mother abandoned him, briefly, terrified as they became of his obsession. When he ran out of female volunteers to test his product, he took to wearing a bladder of pig's blood as a replacement. I can't see how this behaviour would have improved his popularity or status. Now his low-cost and locally made napkins are distributed across India, manufactured by women-run self-help groups. His users have been provided with freedom they never previously experienced. In 2014, this high-school dropout was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world. I am unwilling to consider personal gain Muruganantham's primary motivation. Is he part of the patriarchy?

In 1847, James Young Simpson used ether to help a woman who had a deformed pelvis give birth. Afterwards, he switched to the better-performing chloroform. The first baby delivered under its influence was named "Anaesthesia." By 1853, chloroform was esteemed enough to be used by Queen Victoria, who delivered her seventh baby under its influence. Remarkably soon afterward, the option of painless childbirth was available everywhere. A few people warned of the danger of opposing God's pronouncement to women in Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children …" Some also opposed its use among males: young, healthy, courageous men simply did not need anaesthesia. Such opposition was ineffectual. Use of anaesthesia spread with extreme rapidity (and far faster than would be possible today). Even prominent churchmen supported its use.

The first practical tampon, Tampax, didn't arrive until the 1930s. It was invented by Dr. Earle Cleveland Haas. He made it of compressed cotton, and

designed an applicator from paper tubes. This helped lessen resistance to the products by those who objected to the self-touching that might otherwise occur. By the early 1940s, 25 percent of women were using them. Thirty years later, it was 70 percent. Now it's four out of five, with the remainder relying on pads, which are now hyper-absorbent, and held in place by effective adhesives (opposed to the awkwardly placed, bulky, belted, diaper-like sanitary napkins of the 1970s). Did Muruganantham, Simpson and Haas oppress women, or free them? What about Gregory Goodwin Pincus, who invented the birth control pill? In what manner were these practical, enlightened, persistent men part of a constricting patriarchy?

Why do we teach our young people that our incredible culture is the result of male oppression? Blinded by this central assumption disciplines as diverse as education, social work, art history, gender studies, literature, sociology and, increasingly, law actively treat men as oppressors and men's activity as inherently destructive. They also often directly promote radical political action—radical by all the norms of the societies within which they are situated—which they do not distinguish from education. The Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies at Ottawa's Carleton University, for example, encourages activism as part of their mandate. The Gender Studies Department at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, "teaches feminist, anti-racist, and queer theories and methods that centre activism for social change"—indicating support for the supposition that university education should above all foster political engagement of a particular kind.

Postmodernism and the Long Arm of Marx

These disciplines draw their philosophy from multiple sources. All are heavily influenced by the Marxist humanists. One such figure is Max Horkheimer, who developed critical theory in the 1930s. Any brief summary of his ideas is bound to be oversimplified, but Horkheimer regarded himself as a Marxist. He believed that Western principles of individual freedom or the free market were merely masks that served to disguise the true conditions of the West: inequality, domination and exploitation. He believed that intellectual activity should be devoted to social change, instead of mere understanding, and hoped to emancipate humanity from its enslavement. Horkheimer and his Frankfurt School of associated thinkers—first, in

Germany and later, in the US—aimed at a full-scale critique and transformation of Western civilization.

More important in recent years has been the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, leader of the postmodernists, who came into vogue in the late 1970s. Derrida described his own ideas as a radicalized form of Marxism. Marx attempted to reduce history and society to economics, considering culture the oppression of the poor by the rich. When Marxism was put into practice in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere, economic resources were brutally redistributed. Private property was eliminated, and rural people forcibly collectivized. The result? Tens of millions of people died. Hundreds of millions more were subject to oppression rivalling that still operative in North Korea, the last classic communist holdout. The resulting economic systems were corrupt and unsustainable. The world entered a prolonged and extremely dangerous cold war. The citizens of those societies lived the life of the lie, betraying their families, informing on their neighbours—existing in misery, without complaint (or else).

Marxist ideas were very attractive to intellectual utopians. One of the primary architects of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, Khieu Samphan, received a doctorate at the Sorbonne before he became the nominal head of Cambodia in the mid-1970s. In his doctoral thesis, written in 1959, he argued that the work done by non-farmers in Cambodia’s cities was unproductive: bankers, bureaucrats and businessmen added nothing to society. Instead, they parasitized the genuine value produced through agriculture, small industry and craft. Samphan’s ideas were favourably looked upon by the French intellectuals who granted him his Ph.D. Back in Cambodia, he was provided with the opportunity to put his theories into practice. The Khmer Rouge evacuated Cambodia’s cities, drove all the inhabitants into the countryside, closed the banks, banned the use of currency, and destroyed all the markets. A quarter of the Cambodian population were worked to death in the countryside, in the killing fields.

Lest We Forget: Ideas Have Consequences.

When the communists established the Soviet Union after the First World War, people could be forgiven for hoping that the utopian collectivist dreams

their new leaders purveyed were possible. The decayed social order of the late nineteenth century produced the trenches and mass slaughters of the Great War. The gap between rich and poor was extreme, and most people slaved away in conditions worse than those later described by Orwell. Although the West received word of the horror perpetrated by Lenin after the Russian Revolution, it remained difficult to evaluate his actions from afar. Russia was in post-monarchical chaos, and the news of widespread industrial development and redistribution of property to those who had so recently been serfs provided reason for hope. To complicate things further, the USSR (and Mexico) supported the democratic Republicans when the Spanish Civil War broke out, in 1936. They were fighting against the essentially fascist Nationalists, who had overthrown the fragile democracy established only five years previously, and who found support with the Nazis and Italian fascists.

The intelligentsia in America, Great Britain and elsewhere were severely frustrated by their home countries' neutrality. Thousands of foreigners streamed into Spain to fight for the Republicans, serving in the International Brigades. George Orwell was one of them. Ernest Hemingway served there as a journalist, and was a supporter of the Republicans. Politically concerned young Americans, Canadians and Brits felt a moral obligation to stop talking and start fighting.

All of this drew attention away from concurrent events in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the Stalinist Soviets sent two million kulaks, their richest peasants, to Siberia (those with a small number of cows, a couple of hired hands, or a few acres more than was typical). From the communist viewpoint, these kulaks had gathered their wealth by plundering those around them, and deserved their fate. Wealth signified oppression, and private property was theft. It was time for some equity. More than thirty thousand kulaks were shot on the spot. Many more met their fate at the hands of their most jealous, resentful and unproductive neighbours, who used the high ideals of communist collectivization to mask their murderous intent.

The kulaks were "enemies of the people," apes, scum, vermin, filth and swine. "We will make soap out of the kulak," claimed one particularly brutal cadre of city-dwellers, mobilized by party and Soviet executive committees, and sent out into the countryside. The kulaks were driven, naked, into the streets, beaten, and forced to dig their own graves. The women were raped.

Their belongings were "expropriated," which, in practice, meant that their houses were stripped down to the rafters and ceiling beams and everything was stolen. In many places, the non-kulak peasants resisted, particularly the women, who took to surrounding the persecuted families with their bodies. Such resistance proved futile. The kulaks who didn't die were exiled to Siberia, often in the middle of the night. The trains started in February, in the bitter Russian cold. Housing of the most substandard kind awaited them upon arrival on the desert taiga. Many died, particularly children, from typhoid, measles and scarlet fever.

The "parasitical" kulaks were, in general, the most skillful and hardworking farmers. A small minority of people are responsible for most of the production in any field, and farming proved no different. Agricultural output crashed. What little remained was taken by force out of the countryside and into the cities. Rural people who went out into the fields after the harvest to glean single grains of wheat for their hungry families risked execution. Six million people died of starvation in the Ukraine, the breadbasket of the Soviet Union, in the 1930s. "To eat your own children is a barbarian act," declared posters of the Soviet regime.

Despite more than mere rumours of such atrocities, attitudes towards communism remained consistently positive among many Western intellectuals. There were other things to worry about, and the Second World War allied the Soviet Union with the Western countries opposing Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito. Certain watchful eyes remained open, nonetheless. Malcolm Muggeridge published a series of articles describing Soviet demolition of the peasantry as early as 1933, for the *Manchester Guardian*. George Orwell understood what was going on under Stalin, and he made it widely known. He published *Animal Farm*, a fable satirizing the Soviet Union, in 1945, despite encountering serious resistance to the book's release. Many who should have known better retained their blindness for long after this. Nowhere was this truer than France, and nowhere truer in France than among the intellectuals.

France's most famous mid-century philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, was a well-known communist, although not a card-carrier, until he denounced the Soviet incursion into Hungary in 1956. He remained an advocate for Marxism, nonetheless, and did not finally break with the Soviet Union until

1968, when the Soviets violently suppressed the Czechoslovakians during the Prague Spring.

Not long after came the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, which we have discussed rather extensively in previous chapters. As noted (and is worth noting again), this book utterly demolished communism's moral credibility—first in the West, and then in the Soviet System itself. It circulated in underground *samizdat* format. Russians had twenty-four hours to read their rare copy before handing it to the next waiting mind. A Russian-language reading was broadcast into the Soviet Union by Radio Liberty.

Solzhenitsyn argued that the Soviet system could have never survived without tyranny and slave labour; that the seeds of its worst excesses were definitively sowed in the time of Lenin (for whom the Western communists still served as apologists); and that it was propped up by endless lies, both individual and public. Its sins could not be blamed on a simple cult of personality, as its supporters continued to claim. Solzhenitsyn documented the Soviet Union's extensive mistreatment of political prisoners, its corrupt legal system, and its mass murders, and showed in painstaking detail how these were not aberrations but direct expressions of the underlying communist philosophy. No one could stand up for communism after *The Gulag Archipelago*—not even the communists themselves.

This did not mean that the fascination Marxist ideas had for intellectuals—particularly French intellectuals—disappeared. It merely transformed. Some refused outright to learn. Sartre denounced Solzhenitsyn as a "dangerous element." Derrida, more subtle, substituted the idea of power for the idea of money, and continued on his merry way. Such linguistic sleight-of-hand gave all the barely repentant Marxists still inhabiting the intellectual pinnacles of the West the means to retain their world-view. Society was no longer repression of the poor by the rich. It was oppression of everyone by the powerful.

According to Derrida, hierarchical structures emerged only to include (the beneficiaries of that structure) and to exclude (everyone else, who were therefore oppressed). Even that claim wasn't sufficiently radical. Derrida claimed that divisiveness and oppression were built right into language—built into the very categories we use to pragmatically simplify and negotiate the world. There are "women" only because men gain by excluding them.

There are “males and females” only because members of that more heterogeneous group benefit by excluding the tiny minority of people whose biological sexuality is amorphous. Science only benefits the scientists. Politics only benefits the politicians. In Derrida’s view, hierarchies exist because they gain from oppressing those who are omitted. It is this ill-gotten gain that allows them to flourish.

Derrida famously said (although he denied it, later): “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”—often translated as “there is nothing outside the text.” His supporters say that is a mistranslation, and that the English equivalent should have been “there is no outside-text.” It remains difficult, either way, to read the statement as saying anything other than “everything is interpretation,” and that is how Derrida’s work has generally been interpreted.

It is almost impossible to over-estimate the nihilistic and destructive nature of this philosophy. It puts the act of categorization itself in doubt. It negates the idea that distinctions might be drawn between things for any reasons other than that of raw power. Biological distinctions between men and women? Despite the existence of an overwhelming, multi-disciplinary scientific literature indicating that sex differences are powerfully influenced by biological factors, science is just another game of power, for Derrida and his post-modern Marxist acolytes, making claims to benefit those at the pinnacle of the scientific world. There are no facts. Hierarchical position and reputation as a consequence of skill and competence? All definitions of skill and of competence are merely made up by those who benefit from them, to exclude others, and to benefit personally and selfishly.

There is sufficient truth to Derrida’s claims to account, in part, for their insidious nature. Power is a fundamental motivational force (“a,” not “the”). People compete to rise to the top, and they care where they are in dominance hierarchies. But (and this is where you separate the metaphorical boys from the men, philosophically) *the fact that power plays a role in human motivation does not mean that it plays the only role, or even the primary role*. Likewise, the fact that we can never know everything does make all our observations and utterances dependent on taking some things into account and leaving other things out (as we discussed extensively in Rule 10). That does not justify the claim that everything is interpretation, or that categorization is just exclusion. Beware of single cause interpretations—and beware the people who purvey them.

Although the facts cannot speak for themselves (just as an expanse of land spread out before a voyager cannot tell him how to journey through it), and although there are a myriad ways to interact with—even to perceive—even a small number of objects, that does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Some hurt—yourself and others. Others put you on a collision course with society. Some are not sustainable across time. Others do not get you where you want to go. Many of these constraints are built in to us, as a consequence of billions of years of evolutionary processes. Others emerge as we are socialized into cooperating and competing peacefully and productively with others. Still more interpretations emerge as we discard counterproductive strategies through learning. An endless number of interpretations, certainly: that is not different than saying an endless number of problems. *But a seriously bounded number of viable solutions.* Otherwise life would be easy. And it's not.

Now, I have some beliefs that might be regarded as left-leaning. I think, for example, that the tendency for valuable goods to distribute themselves with pronounced inequality constitutes an ever-present threat to the stability of society. I think there is good evidence for that. That does not mean that the solution to the problem is self-evident. We don't know how to redistribute wealth without introducing a whole host of other problems. Different Western societies have tried different approaches. The Swedes, for example, push equality to its limit. The US takes the opposite tack, assuming that the net wealth-creation of a more free-for-all capitalism constitutes the rising tide that lifts all boats. The results of these experiments are not all in, and countries differ very much in relevant ways. Differences in history, geographic area, population size and ethnic diversity make direct comparisons very difficult. But it certainly is the case that forced redistribution, in the name of utopian equality, is a cure to shame the disease.

I think, as well (on what might be considered the leftish side), that the incremental remake of university administrations into analogues of private corporations is a mistake. I think that the science of management is a pseudo-discipline. I believe that government can, sometimes, be a force for good, as well as the necessary arbiter of a small set of necessary rules. Nonetheless, I do not understand why our society is providing public funding to institutions and educators whose stated, conscious and explicit aim is the demolition of the culture that supports them. Such people have a perfect right to their

opinions and actions, if they remain lawful. But they have no reasonable claim to public funding. If radical right-wingers were receiving state funding for political operations disguised as university courses, as the radical left-wingers clearly are, the uproar from progressives across North America would be deafening.

There are other serious problems lurking in the radical disciplines, apart from the falseness of their theories and methods, and their insistence that collective political activism is morally obligatory. There isn't a shred of hard evidence to support any of their central claims: that Western society is pathologically patriarchal; that the prime lesson of history is that men, rather than nature, were the primary source of the oppression of women (rather than, as in most cases, their partners and supporters); that all hierarchies are based on power and aimed at exclusion. Hierarchies exist for many reasons—some arguably valid, some not—and are incredibly ancient, evolutionarily speaking. Do male crustaceans oppress female crustaceans? Should their hierarchies be upended?

In societies that are well-functioning—not in comparison to a hypothetical utopia, but contrasted with other existing or historical cultures—*competence*, not power, is a prime determiner of status. Competence. Ability. Skill. Not *power*. This is obvious both anecdotally and factually. No one with brain cancer is equity-minded enough to refuse the service of the surgeon with the best education, the best reputation and, perhaps, the highest earnings. Furthermore, the most valid personality trait predictors of long-term success in Western countries are intelligence (as measured with cognitive ability or IQ tests) and conscientiousness (a trait characterized by industriousness and orderliness).[188] There are exceptions. Entrepreneurs and artists are higher in openness to experience,[189] another cardinal personality trait, than in conscientiousness. But openness is associated with verbal intelligence and creativity, so that exception is appropriate and understandable. The predictive power of these traits, mathematically and economically speaking, is exceptionally high—among the highest, in terms of power, of anything ever actually measured at the harder ends of the social sciences. A good battery of personality/cognitive tests can increase the probability of employing someone more competent than average from 50:50 to 85:15. These are the facts, as well supported as anything in the social sciences (and this is saying more than

you might think, as the social sciences are more effective disciplines than their cynical critics appreciate). Thus, not only is the state supporting one-sided radicalism, it is also supporting indoctrination. We do not teach our children that the world is flat. Neither should we teach them unsupported ideologically-predicated theories about the nature of men and women—or the nature of hierarchy.

It is not unreasonable to note (if the deconstructionists would leave it at that) that science can be biased by the interests of power, and to warn against that—or to point out that evidence is too often what powerful people, including scientists, decide it is. After all, scientists are people too, and people like power, just like lobsters like power—just like deconstructionists like to be known for their ideas, and strive rightly to sit atop their academic hierarchies. But that doesn't mean that science—or even deconstructionism—is only about power. Why believe such a thing? Why insist upon it? Perhaps it's this: *if only power exists, then the use of power becomes fully justifiable*. There is no bounding such use by evidence, method, logic, or even the necessity for coherence. There is no bounding by anything "outside the text." That leaves opinion—and force—and the use of force is all too attractive, under such circumstances, just as its employment in the service of that opinion is all too certain. The insane and incomprehensible postmodern insistence that all gender differences are socially constructed, for example, becomes all too understandable when its moral imperative is grasped—when its justification for force is once and for all understood: *Society must be altered, or bias eliminated, until all outcomes are equitable*. But the bedrock of the social constructionist position is the wish for the latter, not belief in the justice of the former. Since all outcome inequalities must be eliminated (inequality being the heart of all evil), then all gender differences must be regarded as socially constructed. Otherwise the drive for equality would be too radical, and the doctrine too blatantly propagandistic. Thus, the order of logic is reversed, so that the ideology can be camouflaged. The fact that such statements lead immediately to internal inconsistencies within the ideology is never addressed. Gender is constructed, but an individual who desires gender re-assignment surgery is to be unarguably considered a man trapped in a woman's body (or vice versa). *The fact that both of these cannot logically be true, simultaneously, is just ignored* (or rationalized away with another

appalling post-modern claim: that logic itself—along with the techniques of science—is merely part of the oppressive patriarchal system).

It is also the case, of course, that all outcomes cannot be equalized. First, outcomes must be measured. Comparing the salaries of people who occupy the same position is relatively straightforward (although complicated significantly by such things as date of hire, given the difference in demand for workers, for example, at different time periods). But there are other dimensions of comparison that are arguably equally relevant, such as tenure, promotion rate, and social influence. The introduction of the "equal pay for equal work" argument immediately complicates even salary comparison beyond practicality, for one simple reason: who decides what work is equal? It's not possible. That's why the marketplace exists. Worse is the problem of group comparison: women should make as much as men. OK. Black women should make as much as white women. OK. Should salary then be adjusted for all parameters of race? At what level of resolution? What racial categories are "real"?

The U.S. National Institute of Health, to take a single bureaucratic example, recognizes American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and White. But there are more than five hundred separate American Indian tribes. By what possible logic should "American Indian" therefore stand as a canonical category? Osage tribal members have a yearly average income of $30K, while Tohono O'odham's make $11K. Are they equally oppressed? What about disabilities? Disabled people should make as much as non-disabled people. OK. On the surface, that's a noble, compassionate, fair claim. But who is disabled? Is someone living with a parent with Alzheimer's disabled? If not, why not? What about someone with a lower IQ? Someone less attractive? Someone overweight? Some people clearly move through life markedly overburdened with problems that are beyond their control, but it is a rare person indeed who isn't suffering from at least one serious catastrophe at any given time—particularly if you include their family in the equation. And why shouldn't you? Here's the fundamental problem: *group identity can be fractionated right down to the level of the individual.* That sentence should be written in capital letters. Every person is unique—and not just in a trivial manner: importantly, significantly, meaningfully unique. Group membership cannot capture that variability. Period.

None of this complexity is ever discussed by the postmodern/Marxist thinkers. Instead, their ideological approach fixes a point of truth, like the North Star, and forces everything to rotate around it. The claim that all gender differences are a consequence of socialization is neither provable, nor disprovable, in some sense, because culture can be brought to bear with such force on groups or individuals that virtually any outcome is attainable, if we are willing to bear the cost. We know, for example, from studies of adopted-out identical twins,[190] that culture can produce a fifteen-point (or one standard deviation) increase in IQ (roughly the difference between the average high school student and the average state college student) at the cost of a three-standard-deviation increase in wealth.[191] What this means, approximately, is that two identical twins, separated at birth, will differ in IQ by fifteen points if the first twin is raised in a family that is poorer than 85 percent of families and the second is raised in a family richer than 95 percent of families. Something similar has recently been demonstrated with education, rather than wealth.[192] We don't know what it would cost in wealth or differential education to produce a more extreme transformation.

What such studies imply is that we could probably minimize the innate differences between boys and girls, if we were willing to exert enough pressure. This would in no way ensure that we were freeing people of either gender to make their own choices. But choice has no place in the ideological picture: if men and women act, voluntarily, to produce gender-unequal outcomes, those very choices must have been determined by cultural bias. In consequence, everyone is a brainwashed victim, wherever gender differences exist, and the rigorous critical theoretician is morally obligated to set them straight. This means that those already equity-minded Scandinavian males, who aren't much into nursing, require even more retraining. The same goes, in principle, for Scandinavian females, who aren't much into engineering.[193] What might such retraining look like? Where might its limits lie? Such things are often pushed past any reasonable limit before they are discontinued. Mao's murderous Cultural Revolution should have taught us that.

Boys into Girls

It has become a tenet of a certain kind of social constructionist theory that the world would be much improved if boys were socialized like girls. Those who put forward such theories assume, first, that aggression is a learned behaviour, and can therefore simply not be taught, and second (to take a particular example) that, “boys should be socialized the way girls have been traditionally socialized, and they should be encouraged to develop socially positive qualities such as tenderness, sensitivity to feelings, nurturance, cooperative and aesthetic appreciation.” In the opinions of such thinkers, aggression will only be reduced when male adolescents and young adults “subscribe to the same standards of behavior as have been traditionally encouraged for women.”[194]

There are so many things wrong with this idea that it is difficult to know where to start. First, it is not the case that aggression is merely learned. Aggression is there at the beginning. There are ancient biological circuits, so to speak, that underlie defensive and predatory aggression.[195] They are so fundamental that they still operate in what are known as decorticate cats, animals that have had the largest and most recently evolved parts of their brain—an overwhelmingly large percentage of the total structure—entirely removed. This suggests not only that aggression is innate, but that it is a consequence of activity in extremely fundamental, basic brain areas. If the brain is a tree, then aggression (along with hunger, thirst and sexual desire) is there in the very trunk.

And, in keeping with this, it appears that a subset of two-year-old boys (about 5 percent) are quite aggressive, by temperament. They take other kids’ toys, kick, bite and hit. Most are nonetheless socialized effectively by the age of four.[196] This is not, however, because they have been encouraged to act like little girls. Instead, they are taught or otherwise learn in early childhood to integrate their aggressive tendencies into more sophisticated behavioural routines. Aggression underlies the drive to be outstanding, to be unstoppable, to compete, to win—to be actively virtuous, at least along one dimension. Determination is its admirable, pro-social face. Aggressive young children who don’t manage to render their temperament sophisticated by the end of infancy are doomed to unpopularity, as their primordial antagonism no longer serves them socially at later ages. Rejected by their peers, they lack further socialization opportunities and tend towards outcast status. These are the

individuals who remain much more inclined toward antisocial and criminal behavior when adolescent and adult. But this does not at all mean that the aggressive drive lacks either utility or value. At a minimum, it is necessary for self-protection.

Compassion as a Vice

Many of the female clients (perhaps even a majority) that I see in my clinical practice have trouble in their jobs and family lives not because they are too aggressive, but because they are not aggressive enough. Cognitive-behavioural therapists call the treatment of such people, generally characterized by the more feminine traits of agreeableness (politeness and compassion) and neuroticism (anxiety and emotional pain), "assertiveness training."[197] Insufficiently aggressive women—and men, although more rarely—do too much for others. They tend to treat those around them as if they were distressed children. They tend to be naïve. They assume that cooperation should be the basis of all social transactions, and they avoid conflict (which means they avoid confronting problems in their relationships as well as at work). They continually sacrifice for others. This may sound virtuous—and it is definitely an attitude that has certain social advantages—but it can and often does become counterproductively one-sided. Because too-agreeable people bend over backwards for other people, they do not stand up properly for themselves. Assuming that others think as they do, they expect—instead of ensuring—reciprocity for their thoughtful actions. When this does not happen, they don't speak up. They do not or cannot straightforwardly demand recognition. The dark side of their characters emerges, because of their subjugation, and they become resentful.

I teach excessively agreeable people to note the emergence of such resentment, which is a very important, although very toxic, emotion. There are only two major reasons for resentment: being taken advantage of (or allowing yourself to be taken advantage of), or whiny refusal to adopt responsibility and grow up. If you're resentful, look for the reasons. Perhaps discuss the issue with someone you trust. Are you feeling hard done by, in an immature manner? If, after some honest consideration, you don't think it's that, perhaps someone is taking advantage of you. This means that you now face a moral obligation to speak up for yourself. This might mean confronting

your boss, or your husband, or your wife, or your child, or your parents. It might mean gathering some evidence, strategically, so that when you confront that person, you can give them several examples of their misbehaviour (at least three), so they can't easily weasel out of your accusations. It might mean failing to concede when they offer you their counterarguments. People rarely have more than four at hand. If you remain unmoved, they get angry, or cry, or run away. It's very useful to attend to tears in such situations. They can be used to motivate guilt on the part of the accuser due, theoretically, to having caused hurt feelings and pain. But tears are often shed in anger. A red face is a good cue. If you can push your point past the first four responses and stand fast against the consequent emotion, you will gain your target's attention—and, perhaps, their respect. This is genuine conflict, however, and it's neither pleasant nor easy.

You must also know clearly what you want out of the situation, and be prepared to clearly articulate your desire. It's a good idea to tell the person you are confronting exactly what you would like them to do instead of what they have done or currently are doing. You might think, "if they loved me, they would know what to do." That's the voice of resentment. Assume ignorance before malevolence. No one has a direct pipeline to your wants and needs—not even you. If you try to determine exactly what you want, you might find that it is more difficult than you think. The person oppressing you is likely no wiser than you, especially about you. Tell them directly what would be preferable, instead, after you have sorted it out. Make your request as small and reasonable as possible—but ensure that its fulfillment would satisfy you. In that manner, you come to the discussion with a solution, instead of just a problem.

Agreeable, compassionate, empathic, conflict-averse people (all those traits group together) let people walk on them, and they get bitter. They sacrifice themselves for others, sometimes excessively, and cannot comprehend why that is not reciprocated. Agreeable people are compliant, and this robs them of their independence. The danger associated with this can be amplified by high trait neuroticism. Agreeable people will go along with whoever makes a suggestion, instead of insisting, at least sometimes, on their own way. So, they lose their way, and become indecisive and too easily swayed. If they are, in addition, easily frightened and hurt, they have even less reason to strike out on their own, as doing so exposes them to threat and danger (at least in the

short term). That’s the pathway to dependent personality disorder, technically speaking.[198] It might be regarded as the polar opposite of antisocial personality disorder, the set of traits characteristic of delinquency in childhood and adolescence and criminality in adulthood. It would be lovely if the opposite of a criminal was a saint—but it’s not the case. The opposite of a criminal is an Oedipal mother, which is its own type of criminal.

The Oedipal mother (and fathers can play this role too, but it’s comparatively rare) says to her child, “I only live for you.” She does everything for her children. She ties their shoes, and cuts up their food, and lets them crawl into bed with her and her partner far too often. That’s a good and conflict-avoidant method for avoiding unwanted sexual attention, as well.

The Oedipal mother makes a pact with herself, her children, and the devil himself. The deal is this: “Above all, never leave me. In return, I will do everything for you. As you age without maturing, you will become worthless and bitter, but you will never have to take any responsibility, and everything you do that’s wrong will always be someone else’s fault.” The children can accept or reject this—and they have some choice in the matter.

The Oedipal mother is the witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. The two children in that fairy tale have a new step-mother. She orders her husband to abandon his children in the forest, as there is a famine and she thinks they eat too much. He obeys his wife, takes his children deep into the woods and leaves them to their fate. Wandering, starving and lonely, they come across a miracle. A house. And not just any house. A candy house. A gingerbread house. A person who had not been rendered too caring, empathic, sympathetic and cooperative might be skeptical, and ask, “Is this too good to be true?” But the children are too young, and too desperate.

Inside the house is a kind old woman, rescuer of distraught children, kind patter of heads and wiper of noses, all bosom and hips, ready to sacrifice herself to their every wish, at a moment’s notice. She feeds the children anything they want, any time they want, and they never have to do anything. But provision of that kind of care makes her hungry. She puts Hansel into a cage, to fatten him up ever more efficiently. He fools her into thinking he’s staying thin by offering her an old bone, when she tries to test his leg for the desired tenderness. She gets too desperate to wait, eventually, and stokes the oven, preparing to cook and eat the object of her doting. Gretel, who has

apparently not been lulled into full submission, waits for a moment of carelessness, and pushes the kind old woman into the oven. The kids run away, and rejoin their father, who has thoroughly repented of his evil actions.

In a household like that, the choicest cut of child is the spirit, and it's always consumed first. Too much protection devastates the developing soul.

The witch in the Hansel and Gretel tale is the Terrible Mother, the dark half of the symbolically feminine. Deeply social as we are in our essence, we tend to view the world as a story, the characters of which are mother, father and child. The feminine, as a whole, is unknown nature outside the bounds of culture, creation and destruction: she is the protective arms of mother and the destructive element of time, the beautiful virgin-mother and the swamp-dwelling hag. This archetypal entity was confused with an objective, historical reality, back in the late 1800s, by a Swiss anthropologist named Johann Jakob Bachofen. Bachofen proposed that humanity had passed through a series of developmental stages in its history.

The first, roughly speaking (after a somewhat anarchic and chaotic beginning), was Das Mutterrecht[199]—a society where women held the dominant positions of power, respect and honour, where polyamory and promiscuity ruled, and where any certainty of paternity was absent. The second, the Dionysian, was a phase of transition, during which these original matriarchal foundations were overturned and power was taken by men. The third phase, the Apollonian, still reigns today. The patriarchy rules, and each woman belongs exclusively to one man. Bachofen's ideas became profoundly influential, in certain circles, despite the absence of any historical evidence to support them. One Marija Gimbutas, for example—an archaeologist—famously claimed in the 1980s and 1990s that a peaceful goddess-and-woman-centred culture once characterized Neolithic Europe.[200] She claimed that it was supplanted and suppressed by an invasive hierarchical warrior culture, which laid the basis for modern society. Art historian Merlin Stone made the same argument in his book *When God Was a Woman*.[201] This whole series of essentially archetypal/mythological ideas became touchstones for the theology of the women's movement and the matriarchal studies of 1970s feminism (Cynthia Eller, who wrote a book criticizing such ideas—*The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*—called this theology "an ennobling lie").[202]

Carl Jung had encountered Bachofen's ideas of primordial matriarchy decades earlier. Jung soon realized, however, that the developmental progression described by the earlier Swiss thinker represented a psychological rather than a historical reality. He saw in Bachofen's thought the same processes of projection of imaginative fantasy on to the external world that had led to the population of the cosmos with constellations and gods. In *The Origins and History of Consciousness*[203] and *The Great Mother*[204], Jung's collaborator Erich Neumann extended his colleague's analysis. Neumann traced the emergence of consciousness, symbolically masculine, and contrasted it with its symbolically feminine, material (mother, matrix) origins, subsuming Freud's theory of Oedipal parenting into a broader archetypal model. For Neumann, and for Jung, consciousness—always symbolically masculine, even in women—struggles upwards toward the light. Its development is painful and anxiety-provoking, as it carries with it the realization of vulnerability and death. It is constantly tempted to sink back down into dependency and unconsciousness, and to shed its existential burden. It is aided in that pathological desire by anything that opposes enlightenment, articulation, rationality, self-determination, strength and competence—by anything that shelters too much, and therefore smothers and devours. Such overprotection is Freud's Oedipal familial nightmare, which we are rapidly transforming into social policy.

The Terrible Mother is an ancient symbol. It manifests itself, for example, in the form of Tiamat, in the earliest written story we have recovered, the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*. Tiamat is the mother of all things, gods and men alike. She is the unknown and chaos and the nature that gives rise to all forms. But she is also the female dragon-deity who moves to destroy her own children, when they carelessly kill their father and attempt to live on the corpse that remains. The Terrible Mother is the spirit of careless unconsciousness, tempting the ever-striving spirit of awareness and enlightenment down into the protective womb-like embrace of the underworld. It's the terror young men feel towards attractive women, who are nature itself, ever ready to reject them, intimately, at the deepest possible level. Nothing inspires self-consciousness, undermines courage, and fosters feelings of nihilism and hatred more than that—except, perhaps, the too-tight embrace of too-caring mom.

The Terrible Mother appears in many fairy tales, and in many stories for adults. In the *Sleeping Beauty*, she is the Evil Queen, dark nature herself—Maleficent, in the Disney version. The royal parents of Princess Aurora fail to invite this force of the night to their baby daughter's christening. Thus, they shelter her too much from the destructive and dangerous side of reality, preferring that she grow up untroubled by such things. Their reward? At puberty, she is still unconscious. The masculine spirit, her prince, is both a man who could save her, by tearing her from her parents, and her own consciousness, trapped in a dungeon by the machinations of the dark side of femininity. When that prince escapes, and presses the Evil Queen too hard, she turns into the Dragon of Chaos itself. The symbolic masculine defeats her with truth and faith, and finds the princess, whose eyes he opens with a kiss.

It might be objected (as it was, with Disney's more recent and deeply propagandistic *Frozen*) that a woman does not need a man to rescue her. That may be true, and it may not. It may be that only the woman who wants (or has) a child needs a man to rescue her—or at least to support and aid her. In any case, it is certain that a woman needs consciousness be rescued, and, as noted above, consciousness is symbolically masculine and has been since the beginning of time (in the guise both of order and of the Logos, the mediating principle). The Prince could be a lover, but could also be a woman's own attentive wakefulness, clarity of vision, and tough-minded independence. Those are masculine traits—in actuality, as well as symbolically, as men are actually less tender-minded and agreeable than women, on average, and are less susceptible to anxiety and emotional pain. And, to say it again: (1) this is most true in those Scandinavian nations where the most steps towards gender equality have been taken—and (2) the differences are not small by the standards whereby such things are measured.

The relationship between the masculine and consciousness is also portrayed, symbolically, in the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel, the heroine, is quite feminine, but she also has a strong spirit of independence. For this reason, she is her father's favourite, although she also causes him the most trouble. Her father Triton is the king, representing the known, culture and order (with a hint of the oppressive rule-giver and tyrant). Because order is always opposed by chaos, Triton has an adversary, Ursula, a tentacled octopus—a serpent, a gorgon, a hydra. Thus, Ursula is in the same archetypal category as the dragon/queen Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (or the jealous

older queen in *Snow White*, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmations*, Miss Medusa in *The Rescuers* and Mother Gothel in *Tangled*).

Ariel wants to kindle a romance with Prince Eric, whom she previously rescued from a shipwreck. Ursula tricks Ariel into giving up her voice so that she can have three days as a human being. Ursula knows full well, however, that a voiceless Ariel will not be able to establish a relationship with the Prince. Without her capacity to speak—without the Logos; without the Divine Word—she will remain underwater, unconscious, forever.

When Ariel fails to form a union with Prince Eric, Ursula steals her soul, and places it in her large collection of shrivelled and warped semi-beings, well-protected by her feminine graces. When King Triton shows up to demand the return of his daughter, Ursula makes him a terrible offer: he can take Ariel's place. Of course, the elimination of the Wise King (who represents, to say it again, the benevolent side of the patriarchy) has been Ursula's nefarious plan all along. Ariel is released, but Triton is now reduced to a pathetic shadow of his former self. More importantly, Ursula now has Triton's magic trident, the source of his godlike power.

Fortunately for everyone concerned (except Ursula), Prince Eric returns, distracting the evil queen of the underworld with a harpoon. This opens an opportunity for Ariel to attack Ursula, who grows, in response, to monstrous proportions—in the same manner as Maleficent, *Sleeping Beauty*'s evil queen. Ursula creates a huge storm, and raises a whole navy of sunken ships from the ocean floor. As she prepares to kill Ariel, Eric commandeers a wrecked ship, and rams her with its broken bowsprit. Triton and the other captured souls are released. The rejuvenated Triton then transforms his daughter into a human being, so she can remain with Eric. For a woman to become complete, such stories claim, she must form a relationship with masculine consciousness and stand up to the terrible world (which sometimes manifests itself, primarily, in the form of her too-present mother). An actual man can help her do that, to some degree, but it is better for everyone concerned when no one is too dependent.

One day, when I was a kid, I was out playing softball with some friends. The teams were a mixture of boys and girls. We were all old enough so that the boys and girls were starting to be interested in one another in an unfamiliar way. Status was becoming more relevant and important. My friend

Jake and I were about to come to blows, pushing each other around near the pitching mound, when my mom walked by. She was a fair distance away, about thirty yards, but I could immediately see by the change in her body language that she knew what was going on. Of course, the other kids saw her as well. She walked right by. I knew that hurt her. Part of her was worried that I would come home with a bloody nose and a black eye. It would have been easy enough for her just to yell, “Hey, you kids, quit that!” or even to come over and interfere. But she didn’t. A few years later, when I was having teenage trouble with my dad, my mom said, “If it was too good at home, you’d never leave.”

My mom is a tender-hearted person. She’s empathetic, and cooperative, and agreeable. Sometimes she lets people push her around. When she went back to work after being at home with her young kids, she found it challenging to stand up to the men. Sometimes that made her resentful—something she also feels, sometimes, in relationship to my father, who is strongly inclined to do what he wants, when he wants to. Despite all that, she’s no Oedipal mother. She fostered the independence of her children, even though doing so was often hard on her. She did the right thing, even though it caused her emotional distress.

Toughen Up, You Weasel

I spent one youthful summer on the prairie of central Saskatchewan working on a railway line crew. Every man in that all-male group was tested by the others during the first two weeks or so of their hiring. Many of the other workers were Northern Cree Indians, quiet guys for the most part, easygoing, until they drank too much, and the chips on their shoulders started to show. They had been in and out of jail, as had most of their relatives. They didn’t attach much shame to that, considering it just another part of the white man’s system. It was also warm in jail in the winter, and the food was regular and plentiful. I lent one of the Cree guys fifty bucks at one point. Instead of paying me back, he offered me a pair of bookends, cut from some of the original rail laid across western Canada, which I still own. That was better than the fifty bucks.

When a new guy first showed up, the other workers would inevitably provide him with an insulting nickname. They called me Howdy-Doody,

after I was accepted as a crew member (something I am still slightly embarrassed to admit). When I asked the originator why he chose that moniker, he said, wittily and absurdly, “Because you look nothing like him.” Working men are often extremely funny, in a caustic, biting, insulting manner (as discussed in Rule 9). They are always harassing each other, partly for amusement, partly to score points in the eternal dominance battle between them, but also partly to see what the other guy will do if he is subjected to social stress. It’s part of the process of character evaluation, as well as camaraderie. When it works well (when everybody gets, and gives as good as they get, and can give and take) it’s a big part of what allows men who work for a living to tolerate or even enjoy laying pipe and working on oil rigs and lumberjacking and working in restaurant kitchens and all the other hot, dirty, physically demanding and dangerous work that is still done almost totally by men.

Not too long after I started on the rail crew, my name was changed to Howdy. This was a great improvement, as it had a good Western connotation, and was not obviously linked to that stupid puppet. The next man hired was not so fortunate. He carried a fancy lunchbucket, which was a mistake, as brown paper bags were the proper, non-pretentious convention. It was a little too nice and too new. It looked like maybe his mother had bought it (and packed it) for him. Thus, it became his name. Lunchbucket was not a good-humored guy. He bitched about everything, and had a bad attitude. Everything was someone else’s fault. He was touchy, and none too quick on the draw.

Lunchbucket couldn’t accept his name, or settle into his job. He adopted an attitude of condescending irritation when addressed, and reacted to the work in the same manner. He was not fun to be around, and he couldn’t take a joke. That’s fatal, on a work crew. After about three days of carrying on with his ill-humour and general air of hard-done-by superiority, Lunchbucket started to experience harassment extending well beyond his nickname. He would be peevishly working away on the line, surrounded by about seventy men, spread out over a quarter mile. Suddenly a pebble would appear out of nowhere, flying through the air, aimed at his hardhat. A direct hit would produce a thunking sound, deeply satisfying to all the quietly attending onlookers. Even this failed to improve his humour. So, the pebbles got larger. Lunchbucket would involve himself in something and forget to pay attention.

Then, "thunk!"—a well-aimed stone would nail him on the noggin, producing a burst of irritated and ineffectual fury. Quiet amusement would ripple down the rail line. After a few days of this, no wiser, and carrying a few bruises, Lunchbucket vanished.

Men enforce a code of behaviour on each other, when working together. Do your work. Pull your weight. Stay awake and pay attention. Don't whine or be touchy. Stand up for your friends. Don't suck up and don't snitch. Don't be a slave to stupid rules. Don't, in the immortal words of Arnold Schwarzenegger, be a girlie man. Don't be dependent. At all. Ever. Period. The harassment that is part of acceptance on a working crew is a test: are you tough, entertaining, competent and reliable? If not, go away. Simple as that. We don't need to feel sorry for you. We don't want to put up with your narcissism, and we don't want to do your work.

There was a famous advertisement in the form of a comic strip issued a few decades ago by the bodybuilder Charles Atlas. It was titled "The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac" and could be found in almost every comic book, most of which were read by boys. Mac, the protagonist, is sitting on a beach blanket with an attractive young woman. A bully runs by, and kicks sand in both their faces. Mac objects. The much larger man grabs him by the arm and says, "Listen here. I'd smash your face …. Only you're so skinny you might dry up and blow away." The bully departs. Mac says to the girl, "The big bully! I'll get even some day." She adopts a provocative pose, and says, "Oh, don't let it bother you, little boy." Mac goes home, considers his pathetic physique, and buys the Atlas program. Soon, he has a new body. The next time he goes to the beach, he punches the bully in the nose. The now-admiring girl clings to his arm. "Oh, Mac!" she says. "You're a real man after all."

That ad is famous for a reason. It summarizes human sexual psychology in seven straightforward panels. The too-weak young man is embarrassed and self-conscious, as he should be. What good is he? He gets put down by other men and, worse, by desirable women. Instead of drowning in resentment, and skulking off to his basement to play video games in his underwear, covered with Cheetos dust, he presents himself with what Alfred Adler, Freud's most practical colleague, called a "compensatory fantasy."[205] The goal of such a fantasy is not so much wish-fulfillment, as illumination of a genuine path

forward. Mac takes serious note of his scarecrow-like build and decides that he should develop a stronger body. More importantly, he puts his plan into action. He identifies with the part of himself that could transcend his current state, and becomes the hero of his own adventure. He goes back to the beach, and punches the bully in the nose. Mac wins. So does his eventual girlfriend. So does everybody else.

It is to women's clear advantage that men do not happily put up with dependency among themselves. Part of the reason that so many a working-class woman does not marry, now, as we have alluded to, is because she does not want to look after a man, struggling for employment, as well as her children. And fair enough. A woman should look after her children—although that is not all she should do. And a man should look after a woman and children—although that is not all he should do. But a woman should not look after a man, because she must look after children, and a man should not be a child. This means that he must not be dependent. This is one of the reasons that men have little patience for dependent men. And let us not forget: wicked women may produce dependent sons, may support and even marry dependent men, but awake and conscious women want an awake and conscious partner.

If is for this reason that Nelson Muntz of *The Simpsons* is so necessary to the small social group that surrounds Homer's antihero son, Bart. Without Nelson, King of the Bullies, the school would soon be overrun by resentful, touchy Milhouses, narcissistic, intellectual Martin Princes, soft, chocolate-gorging German children, and infantile Ralph Wiggums. Muntz is a corrective, a tough, self-sufficient kid who uses his own capacity for contempt to decide what line of immature and pathetic behaviour simply cannot be crossed. Part of the genius of *The Simpsons* is its writers' refusal to simply write Nelson off as an irredeemable bully. Abandoned by his worthless father, neglected, thankfully, by his thoughtless slut of a mother, Nelson does pretty well, everything considered. He's even of romantic interest to the thoroughly progressive Lisa, much to her dismay and confusion (for much the same reasons that *Fifty Shades of Grey* became a worldwide phenomenon).

When softness and harmlessness become the only consciously acceptable virtues, then hardness and dominance will start to exert an unconscious fascination. Partly what this means for the future is that if men are pushed too

hard to feminize, they will become more and more interested in harsh, fascist political ideology. *Fight Club*, perhaps the most fascist popular film made in recent years by Hollywood, with the possible exception of the Iron Man series, provides a perfect example of such inevitable attraction. The populist groundswell of support for Donald Trump in the US is part of the same process, as is (in far more sinister form) the recent rise of far-right political parties even in such moderate and liberal places as Holland, Sweden and Norway.

Men have to toughen up. Men demand it, and women want it, even though they may not approve of the harsh and contemptuous attitude that is part and parcel of the socially demanding process that fosters and then enforces that toughness. Some women don’t like losing their baby boys, so they keep them forever. Some women don’t like men, and would rather have a submissive mate, even if he is useless. This also provides them with plenty to feel sorry for themselves about, as well. The pleasures of such self-pity should not be underestimated.

Men toughen up by pushing themselves, and by pushing each other. When I was a teenager, the boys were much more likely to get into car accidents than the girls (as they still are). This was because they were out spinning donuts at night in icy parking lots. They were drag racing and driving their cars over the roadless hills extending from the nearby river up to the level land hundreds of feet higher. They were more likely to fight physically, and to skip class, and to tell the teachers off, and to quit school because they were tired of raising their hands for permission to go to the bathroom when they were big and strong enough to work on the oil rigs. They were more likely to race their motorbikes on frozen lakes in the winter. Like the skateboarders, and crane climbers, and free runners, they were doing dangerous things, trying to make themselves useful. When this process goes too far, boys (and men) drift into the antisocial behavior which is far more prevalent in males than in females.[206] That does not mean that every manifestation of daring and courage is criminal.

When the boys were spinning donuts, they were also testing the limits of their cars, their ability as drivers, and their capacity for control, in an out-of-control situation. When they told off the teachers, they were pushing against authority, to see if there was any real authority there—the kind that could be

relied on, in principle, in a crisis. When they quit school, they went to work as rig roughnecks when it was forty bloody degrees below zero. It wasn't weakness that propelled so many out of the classroom, where a better future arguably awaited. It was strength.

If they're healthy, women don't want boys. They want men. They want someone to contend with; someone to grapple with. If they're tough, they want someone tougher. If they're smart, they want someone smarter. They desire someone who brings to the table something they can't already provide. This often makes it hard for tough, smart, attractive women to find mates: there just aren't that many men around who can outclass them enough to be considered desirable (who are higher, as one research publication put it, in "income, education, self-confidence, intelligence, dominance and social position").[207] The spirit that interferes when boys are trying to become men is, therefore, no more friend to woman than it is to man. It will object, just as vociferously and self-righteously ("you can't do it, it's too dangerous") when little girls try to stand on their own two feet. It negates consciousness. It's antihuman, desirous of failure, jealous, resentful and destructive. No one truly on the side of humanity would ally him or herself with such a thing. No one aiming at moving up would allow him or herself to become possessed by such a thing. And if you think tough men are dangerous, wait until you see what weak men are capable of.

Leave children alone when they are skateboarding.

RULE 12

PET A CAT WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER ONE ON THE STREET

DOGS ARE OK TOO

I am going to start this chapter by stating directly that I own a dog, an American Eskimo, one of the many variants of the basic spitz type. They were known as German spitzes until the First World War made it verboten to admit that anything good could come from Germany. American Eskimos are among the most beautiful of dogs, with a pointed, classic wolf face, upright ears, a long thick coat, and a curly tail. They are also very intelligent. Our dog, whose name is Sikko (which means "ice" in an Inuit language, according to my daughter, who named him), learns tricks very rapidly, and can do so even now that he's old. I taught him a new stunt, recently, when he turned thirteen. He already knew how to shake a paw, and to balance a treat on his nose. I taught him to do both at the same time. However, it's not at all clear he enjoys it.

We bought Sikko for my daughter, Mikhaila, when she was about ten years old. He was an unbearably cute pup. Small nose and ears, rounded face, big eyes, awkward movements—these features automatically elicit caretaking behaviour from humans, male and female alike.[208] This was certainly the case with Mikhaila, who was also occupied with the care of bearded dragons, gekkoes, ball pythons, chameleons, iguanas and a twenty-pound, thirty-two-inch-long Flemish Giant rabbit named George, who nibbled on everything in the house and frequently escaped (to the great consternation of those who then spied his improbably large form in their tiny mid-city gardens). She had all these animals because she was allergic to the more typical pets—excepting Sikko, who had the additional advantage of being hypo-allergenic.

Sikko garnered fifty nicknames (we counted) which varied broadly in their emotional tone, and reflected both the affection in which he was held and our occasional frustration with his beastly habits. Scumdog was probably my

favorite, but I also held Rathound, Furball and Suck-dog in rather high esteem. The kids used Sneak and Squeak (sometimes with an appended o) most frequently, but accompanied it with Snooky, Ugdog, and Snorfalopogus (horrible though it is to admit). Snorbs is Mikhaila's current moniker of choice. She uses it to greet him after a prolonged absence. For full effect, it must be uttered in a high-pitched and surprised voice.

Sikko also happens to have his own Instagram hashtag: #JudgementalSikko.

I am describing my dog instead of writing directly about cats because I don't wish to run afoul of a phenomenon known as "minimal group identification," discovered by the social psychologist Henri Tajfel.[209] Tajfel brought his research subjects into his lab and sat them down in front of a screen, onto which he flashed a number of dots. The subjects were asked to estimate their quantity. Then he categorized his subjects as overestimators vs underestimators, as well as accurate vs inaccurate, and put them into groups corresponding to their performance. Then he asked them to divide money among the members of all the groups.

Tajfel found that his subjects displayed a marked preference for their own group members, rejecting an egalitarian distribution strategy and disproportionately rewarding those with whom they now identified. Other researchers have assigned people to different groups using ever more arbitrary strategies, such as flipping a coin. It didn't matter, even when the subjects were informed of the way the groups were composed. People still favoured the co-members of their personal group.

Tajfel's studies demonstrated two things: first, *that people are social*; second, *that people are antisocial*. People are social because they like the members of their own group. People are antisocial because they don't like the members of other groups. Exactly why this is so has been the subject of continual debate. I think it might be a solution to a complex problem of optimization. Such problems arise, for example, when two or more factors are important, but none cannot be maximized without diminishing the others. A problem of this sort emerges, for example, because of the antipathy between cooperation and competition, both of which are socially and psychologically desirable. Cooperation is for safety, security and companionship. Competition is for personal growth and status. However, if a

given group is too small, it has no power or prestige, and cannot fend off other groups. In consequence, being one of its members is not that useful. If the group is too large, however, the probability of climbing near or to the top declines. So, it becomes too hard to get ahead. Perhaps people identify with groups at the flip of a coin because they deeply want to organize themselves, protect themselves, and still have some reasonable probability of climbing the dominance hierarchy. Then they favour their own group, because favouring it helps it thrive—and climbing something that is failing is not a useful strategy.

In any case, it is because of Tajfel's minimal-conditions discovery that I began this cat-related chapter with a description of my dog. Otherwise, the mere mention of a cat in the title would be enough to turn many dog people against me, just because I didn't include canines in the group of entities that should be petted. Since I also like dogs, there is no reason for me to suffer such a fate. So, if you like to pet dogs when you meet them on the street, don't feel obliged to hate me. Rest assured, instead, that this is also an activity of which I approve. I would also like to apologize to all the cat people who now feel slighted, because they were hoping for a cat story but had to read all this dog-related material. Perhaps they might be satisfied by some assurance that cats do illustrate the point I want to make better, and that I will eventually discuss them. First, however, to other things.

Suffering and the Limitations of Being

The idea that life is suffering is a tenet, in one form or another, of every major religious doctrine, as we have already discussed. Buddhists state it directly. Christians illustrate it with the cross. Jews commemorate the suffering endured over centuries. Such reasoning universally characterizes the great creeds, because human beings are intrinsically fragile. We can be damaged, even broken, emotionally and physically, and we are all subject to the depredations of aging and loss. This is a dismal set of facts, and it is reasonable to wonder how we can expect to thrive and be happy (or even to want to exist, sometimes) under such conditions.

I was speaking recently with a client whose husband had been engaging in a successful battle with cancer for an agonizing period of five years. They had both held up remarkably and courageously over this period. However, he fell prey to the tendency of that dread condition to metastasize and, in

consequence, had been given very little time to live. It is perhaps hardest to hear terrible news like this when you are still in the fragile post-recovery state that occurs after dealing successfully with previous bad news. Tragedy at such a time seems particularly unfair. It is the sort of thing that can make you distrust even hope itself. It's frequently sufficient to cause genuine trauma. My client and I discussed a number of issues, some philosophical and abstract, some more concrete. I shared with her some of the thoughts that I had developed about the whys and wherefores of human vulnerability.

When my son, Julian, was about three, he was particularly cute. He's twenty years older than that now, but still quite cute (a compliment I'm sure he'll particularly enjoy reading). Because of him, I thought a lot about the fragility of small children. A three-year-old is easily damaged. Dogs can bite him. Cars can hit him. Mean kids can push him over. He can get sick (and sometimes did). Julian was prone to high fevers and the delirium they sometimes produce. Sometimes I had to take him into the shower with me and cool him off when he was hallucinating, or even fighting with me, in his feverish state. There are few things that make it harder to accept the fundamental limitations of human existence than a sick child.

Mikhaila, a year and a few months older than Julian, also had her problems. When she was two, I would lift her up on my shoulders and carry her around. Kids enjoy that. Afterwards, however, when I put her feet back on the ground, she would sit down and cry. So, I stopped doing it. That seemed to be the end of the problem—with a seemingly minor exception. My wife, Tammy, told me that something was wrong with Mikhaila's gait. I couldn't see it. Tammy thought it might be related to her reaction to being carried on my shoulders.

Mikhaila was a sunny child and very easy to get along with. One day when she was about fourteen months old I took her along with Tammy and her grandparents to Cape Cod, when we lived in Boston. When we got there, Tammy and her mom and dad walked ahead, and left me with Mikhaila in the car. We were in the front seat. She was lying there in the sun, babbling away. I leaned over to hear what she was saying.

"Happy, happy, happy, happy, happy."

That's what she was like.

When she turned six, however, she started to get mopey. It was hard to get her out of bed in the morning. She put on her clothes very slowly. When we

walked somewhere, she lagged behind. She complained that her feet hurt and that her shoes didn't fit. We bought her ten different pairs, but it didn't help. She went to school, and held her head up, and behaved properly. But when she came home, and saw her Mom, she would break into tears.

We had recently moved from Boston to Toronto, and attributed these changes to the stress of the move. But it didn't get better. Mikhaila began to walk up and down stairs one step at a time. She began to move like someone much older. She complained if you held her hand. (One time, much later, she asked me, "Dad, when you played 'this little piggy,' with me when I was little, was it supposed to hurt?" Things you learn too late …).

A physician at our local medical clinic told us, "Sometimes children have growing pains. They're normal. But you could think about taking her to see a physiotherapist." So, we did. The physiotherapist tried to rotate Mikhaila's heel. It didn't move. That was not good. The physio told us, "Your daughter has juvenile rheumatoid arthritis." This was not what we wanted to hear. We did not like that physiotherapist. We went back to the medical clinic. Another physician there told us to take Mikhaila to the Hospital for Sick Children. The doctor said, "Take her to the emergency room. That way, you will be able to see a rheumatologist quickly." Mikhaila had arthritis, all right. The physio, bearer of unwelcome news, was correct. Thirty-seven affected joints. Severe polyarticular juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). Cause? Unknown. Prognosis? Multiple early joint replacements.

What sort of God would make a world where such a thing could happen, at all?—much less to an innocent and happy little girl? It's a question of absolutely fundamental import, for believer and non-believer alike. It's an issue addressed (as are so many difficult matters) in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the great novel by Dostoevsky we began to discuss in Rule 7. Dostoevsky expresses his doubts about the propriety of Being through the character of Ivan who, if you remember, is the articulate, handsome, sophisticated brother (and greatest adversary) of the monastic novitiate Alyosha. "It's not God I don't accept. Understand this," says Ivan. "I do not accept the world that He created, this world of God's, and cannot agree with it."

Ivan tells Alyosha a story about a small girl whose parents punished her by locking her in a freezing outhouse overnight (a story Dostoevsky culled from a newspaper of the time). "Can you just see those two snoozing away while

their daughter was crying all night?" says Ivan. "And imagine this little child: unable to understand what was happening to her, beating her frozen little chest and crying meek little tears, begging 'gentle Jesus' to get her out of that horrible place! … Alyosha: if you were somehow promised that the world could finally have complete and total peace—but only on the condition that you tortured one little child to death—say, that girl who was freezing in the outhouse … would you do it?" Alyosha demurs. "No, I would not," he says, softly.[210] He would not do what God seems to freely allow.

I had realized something relevant to this, years before, about three-year-old Julian (remember him? :)). I thought, "I love my son. He's three, and cute and little and comical. But I am also afraid for him, because he could be hurt. If I had the power to change that, what might I do?" I thought, "He could be twenty feet tall instead of forty inches. Nobody could push him over then. He could be made of titanium, instead of flesh and bone. Then, if some brat bounced a toy truck off his noggin, he wouldn't care. He could have a computer-enhanced brain. And even if he was damaged, somehow, his parts could be immediately replaced. Problem solved!" But no—not problem solved—and not just because such things are currently impossible. Artificially fortifying Julian would have been the same as destroying him. Instead of his little three-year-old self, he would be a cold, steel-hard robot. That wouldn't be Julian. It would be a monster. I came to realize through such thoughts that what can be truly loved about a person is inseparable from their limitations. Julian wouldn't have been little and cute and lovable if he wasn't also prone to illness, and loss, and pain, and anxiety. Since I loved him a lot, I decided that he was all right the way he was, despite his fragility.

It's been harder with my daughter. As her disease progressed, I began to piggy-back her around (not on my shoulders) when we went for walks. She started taking oral naproxen and methotrexate, the latter a powerful chemotherapy agent. She had a number of cortisol injections (wrists, shoulders, ankles, elbows, knees, hips, fingers, toes and tendons), all under general anaesthetic. This helped temporarily, but her decline continued. One day Tammy took Mikhaila to the zoo. She pushed her around in a wheelchair.

That was not a good day.

Her rheumatologist suggested prednisone, a corticosteroid, long used to fight inflammation. But prednisone has many side effects, not the least of

which is severe facial swelling. It wasn't clear that this was better than the arthritis, not for a little girl. Fortunately, if that is the right word, the rheumatologist told us of a new drug. It had been used previously, but only on adults. So Mikhaila became the first Canadian child to receive etanercept, a "biological" specifically designed for autoimmune diseases. Tammy accidentally administered ten times the recommended dose the first few injections. Poof! Mikhaila was fixed. A few weeks after the trip to the zoo, she was zipping around, playing little league soccer. Tammy spent all summer just watching her run.

We wanted Mikhaila to control as much of her life as she could. She had always been strongly motivated by money. One day we found her outside, surrounded by the books of her early childhood, selling them to passersby. I sat her down one evening and told her that I would give her fifty dollars if she could do the injection herself. She was eight. She struggled for thirty-five minutes, holding the needle close to her thigh. Then she did it. Next time I paid her twenty dollars, but only gave her ten minutes. Then it was ten dollars, and five minutes. We stayed at ten for quite a while. It was a bargain.

After a few years, Mikhaila became completely symptom-free. The rheumatologist suggested that we start weaning her off her medications. Some children grow out of JIA when they hit puberty. No one knows why. She began to take methotrexate in pill form, instead of injecting it. Things were good for four years. Then, one day, her elbow started to ache. We took her back to the hospital. "You only have one actively arthritic joint," said the rheumatologist's assistant. It wasn't "only." Two isn't much more than one, but one is a lot more than zero. One meant she hadn't grown out of her arthritis, despite the hiatus. The news demolished her for a month, but she was still in dance class and playing ball games with her friends on the street in front of our house.

The rheumatologist had some more unpleasant things to say the next September, when Mikhaila started grade eleven. An MRI revealed joint deterioration at the hip. She told Mikhaila, "Your hip will have to be replaced before you turn thirty." Perhaps the damage had been done, before the etanercept worked its miracle? We didn't know. It was ominous news. One day, a few weeks after, Mikhaila was playing ball hockey in her high school gym. Her hip locked up. She had to hobble off the court. It started to hurt more and more. The rheumatologist said, "Some of your femur appears to be

dead. You don’t need a hip replacement when you’re thirty. You need one now.”

As I sat with my client—as she discussed her husband’s advancing illness—we discussed the fragility of life, the catastrophe of existence, and the sense of nihilism evoked by the spectre of death. I started with my thoughts about my son. She had asked, like everyone in her situation, “Why my husband? Why me? Why this?” My realization of the tight interlinking between vulnerability and Being was the best answer I had for her. I told her an old Jewish story, which I believe is part of the commentary on the Torah. It begins with a question, structured like a Zen koan. *Imagine a Being who is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. What does such a Being lack?*[211] The answer? *Limitation*.

If you are already everything, everywhere, always, there is nowhere to go and nothing to be. Everything that could be already is, and everything that could happen already has. And it is for this reason, so the story goes, that God created man. No limitation, no story. No story, no Being. That idea has helped me deal with the terrible fragility of Being. It helped my client, too. I don’t want to overstate the significance of this. I don’t want to claim that this somehow makes it all OK. She still faced the cancer afflicting her husband, just as I still faced my daughter’s terrible illness. But there’s something to be said for recognizing that existence and limitation are inextricably linked.

> *Though thirty spokes may form the wheel,*
> *it is the hole within the hub*
> *which gives the wheel utility.*
> *It is not the clay the potter throws,*
> *which gives the pot its usefulness,*
> *but the space within the shape,*
> *from which the pot is made.*
> *Without a door, the room cannot be entered,*
> *and without its windows it is dark*
> *Such is the utility of non-existence.*[212]

A realization of this sort emerged more recently, in the pop culture world, during the evolution of the DC Comics cultural icon Superman. Superman was created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. In the beginning, he could move cars, trains and even ships. He could run faster than a locomotive. He could “leap over tall buildings in a single bound.” As he developed over the next four decades, however, Superman’s power began to

expand. By the late sixties, he could fly faster than light. He had super-hearing and X-ray vision. He could blast heat-rays from his eyes. He could freeze objects and generate hurricanes with his breath. He could move entire planets. Nuclear blasts didn't faze him. And, if he did get hurt, somehow, he would immediately heal. Superman became invulnerable.

Then a strange thing happened. He got boring. The more amazing his abilities became, the harder it was to think up interesting things for him to do. DC first overcame this problem in the 1940s. Superman became vulnerable to the radiation produced by kryptonite, a material remnant of his shattered home planet. Eventually, more than two dozen variants emerged. Green kryptonite weakened Superman. In sufficient dosage, it could even kill him. Red caused him to behave strangely. Red-green caused him to mutate (he once grew a third eye in the back of his head).

Other techniques were necessary to keep Superman's story compelling. In 1976, he was scheduled to battle Spiderman. It was the first superhero cross-over between Stan Lee's upstart Marvel Comics, with its less idealized characters, and DC, the owner of Superman and Batman. But Marvel had to augment Spiderman's powers for the battle to remain plausible. That broke the rules of the game. Spiderman is Spiderman because he has the powers of a spider. If he is suddenly granted any old power, he's not Spiderman. The plot falls apart.

By the 1980s, Superman was suffering from terminal deus ex machina—a Latin term meaning "god from a machine." The term described the rescue of the imperilled hero in ancient Greek and Romans plays by the sudden and miraculous appearance of an all-powerful god. In badly written stories, to this very day, a character in trouble can be saved or a failing plot redeemed by a bit of implausible magic or other chicanery not in keeping with the reader's reasonable expectations. Sometimes Marvel Comics, for example, saves a failing story in exactly this manner. Lifeguard, for example, is an X-Man character who can develop whatever power is necessary to save a life. He's very handy to have around. Other examples abound in popular culture. At the end of Stephen King's *The Stand,* for example (spoiler alert), God Himself destroys the novel's evil characters. The entire ninth season (1985–86) of the primetime soap *Dallas* was later revealed as a dream. Fans object to such things, and rightly so. They've been ripped off. People following a story are willing to suspend disbelief as long as the limitations making the story

possible are coherent and consistent. Writers, for their part, agree to abide by their initial decisions. When writers cheat, fans get annoyed. They want to toss the book in the fireplace, and throw a brick through the TV.

And that became Superman's problem: he developed powers so extreme that he could "deus" himself out of anything, at any time. In consequence, in the 1980s, the franchise nearly died. Artist-writer John Byrne successfully rebooted it, rewriting Superman, retaining his biography, but depriving him of many of his new powers. He could no longer lift planets, or shrug off an H-bomb. He also became dependent on the sun for his power, like a reverse vampire. He gained some reasonable limitations. A superhero who can do anything turns out to be no hero at all. He's nothing specific, so he's nothing. He has nothing to strive against, so he can't be admirable. *Being of any reasonable sort appears to require limitation*. Perhaps this is because Being requires Becoming, perhaps, as well as mere static existence—and to become is to become something more, or at least something different. That is only possible for something limited.

Fair enough.

But what about the suffering caused by such limits? Perhaps the limits required by Being are so extreme that the whole project should just be scrapped. Dostoevsky expresses this idea very clearly in the voice of the protagonist of *Notes from Underground*: "So you see, you can say anything about world history—anything and everything that the most morbid imagination can think up. Except one thing, that is. It cannot be said that world history is reasonable. The word sticks in one's throat."[213] Goethe's Mephistopheles, the adversary of Being, announces his opposition explicitly to God's creation in *Faust*, as we have seen. Years later, Goethe wrote *Faust, Part II*. He has the Devil repeat his credo, in a slightly different form, just to hammer home the point:[214]

> *Gone, to sheer Nothing, past with null made one!*
> *What matters our creative endless toil,*
> *When, at a snatch, oblivion ends the coil?*
> *"It is by-gone"—How shall this riddle run?*
> *As good as if things never had begun,*
> *Yet circle back, existence to possess:*
> *I'd rather have Eternal Emptiness.*

Anyone can understand such words, when a dream collapses, a marriage ends, or a family member is struck down by a devastating disease. How can reality be structured so unbearably? How can this be?

Perhaps, as the Columbine boys suggested (see Rule 6), it would be better not to be at all. Perhaps it would be even better if there was no Being at all. But people who come to the former conclusion are flirting with suicide, and those who come to the latter with something worse, something truly monstrous. They're consorting with the idea of the destruction of everything. They are toying with genocide—and worse. Even the darkest regions have still darker corners. And what is truly horrifying is that such conclusions are understandable, maybe even inevitable—although not inevitably acted upon. What is a reasonable person to think when faced, for example, with a suffering child? Is it not precisely the reasonable person, the compassionate person, who would find such thoughts occupying his mind? How could a good God allow such a world as this to exist?

Logical they might be. Understandable, they might be. But there is a terrible catch to such conclusions. Acts undertaken in keeping with them (if not the thoughts themselves) inevitably serve to make a bad situation even worse. Hating life, despising life—even for the genuine pain that life inflicts—merely serves to make life itself worse, unbearably worse. There is no genuine protest in that. There is no goodness in that, only the desire to produce suffering, for the sake of suffering. That is the very essence of evil. People who come to that kind of thinking are one step from total mayhem. Sometimes they merely lack the tools. Sometimes, like Stalin, they have their finger on the nuclear button.

But is there any coherent alternative, given the self-evident horrors of existence? Can Being itself, with its malarial mosquitoes, child soldiers and degenerative neurological diseases, truly be justified? I'm not sure I could have formulated a proper answer to such a question in the nineteenth century, before the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth were monstrously perpetrated on millions of people. I don't know that it's possible to understand why such doubts are morally impermissible without the fact of the Holocaust and the Stalinist purges and Mao's catastrophic Great Leap Forward.[215] And I also don't think it is possible to answer the question by *thinking*. Thinking leads inexorably to the abyss. It did not work for Tolstoy. It might not even have

worked for Nietzsche, who arguably thought more clearly about such things than anyone in history. But if it is not thinking that can be relied upon in the direst of situations, what is left? Thought, after all, is the highest of human achievements, is it not?

Perhaps not.

Something supersedes thinking, despite its truly awesome power. When existence reveals itself as existentially intolerable, thinking collapses in on itself. In such situations—in the depths—it's *noticing*, not thinking, that does the trick. Perhaps you might start by noticing this: when you love someone, *it's not despite their limitations. It's because of their limitations*. Of course, it's complicated. You don't have to be in love with every shortcoming, and merely accept. You shouldn't stop trying to make life better, or let suffering just be. But there appear to be limits on the path to improvement beyond which we might not want to go, lest we sacrifice our humanity itself. Of course, it's one thing to say, "Being requires limitation," and then to go about happily, when the sun is shining and your father is free of Alzheimer's disease and your kids are healthy and your marriage happy. But when things go wrong?

Disintegration and Pain

Mikhaila stayed awake many nights when she was in pain. When her grandfather came to visit, he gave her a few of his Tylenol 3s, which contain codeine. Then she could sleep. But not for long. Our rheumatologist, instrumental in producing Mikhaila's remission, hit the limit of her courage when dealing with our child's pain. She had once prescribed opiates to a young girl, who became addicted. She swore never to do so again. She said, "Have you tried ibuprofen?" Mikhaila learned then that doctors don't know everything. Ibuprofen for her was a crumb of bread for a starving man.

We talked to a new doctor. He listened carefully. Then he helped Mikhaila. First, he prescribed T3s, the same medication her grandfather had briefly shared. This was brave. Physicians face a lot of pressure to avoid the prescription of opiates—not least to children. But opiates *work*. Soon, however, the Tylenol was insufficient. She started taking oxycontin, an opioid known pejoratively as hillbilly heroin. This controlled her pain, but produced other problems. Tammy took Mikhaila out for lunch a week after

the prescription started. She could have been drunk. Her speech was slurred. Her head nodded. This was not good.

My sister-in-law is a palliative care nurse. She thought we could add Ritalin, an amphetamine often used for hyperactive kids, to the oxycontin. The Ritalin restored Mikhaila's alertness and had some pain-suppressing qualities of its own (this is a very a good thing to know if you are ever faced with someone's intractable suffering). But her pain became increasingly excruciating. She started to fall. Then her hip seized up on her again, this time in the subway on a day when the escalator was not working. Her boyfriend carried her up the stairs. She took a cab home. The subway was no longer a reliable form of transportation. That March we bought Mikhaila a 50cc motor scooter. It was dangerous to let her ride it. It was also dangerous for her to lack all freedom. We chose the former danger. She passed her learner's exam, which allowed her to pilot the vehicle during the day. She was given a few months to progress towards her permanent licence.

In May her hip was replaced. The surgeon was even able to adjust for a pre-existent half centimetre difference in leg length. The bone hadn't died, either. That was only a shadow on the x-ray. Her aunt and her grandparents came to see her. We had some better days. Immediately after the surgery, however, Mikhaila was placed in an adult rehabilitation centre. She was the youngest person in the place, by about sixty years. Her aged roommate, very neurotic, wouldn't allow the lights to be off, even at night. The old woman couldn't make it to the toilet and had to use a bedpan. She couldn't stand to have the door to her room closed. But it was right beside the nurses' station, with its continual alarm bells and loud conversations. There was no sleeping there, where sleeping was required. No visitors were allowed after 7 p.m. The physio—the very reason for her placement—was on vacation. The only person who helped her was the janitor, who volunteered to move her to a multi-bed ward when she told the on-duty nurse that she couldn't sleep. This was the same nurse who had laughed when she'd found out which room Mikhaila had been assigned to.

She was supposed to be there for six weeks. She was there three days. When the vacationing physio returned, Mikhaila climbed the rehab-centre stairs and immediately mastered her additional required exercises. While she was doing that, we outfitted our home with the necessary handrails. Then we

took her home. All that pain and surgery—she handled that fine. The appalling rehab centre? That produced post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Mikhaila enrolled in a full-fledged motorcycle course in June, so she could continue legally using her scooter. We were all terrified by this necessity. What if she fell? What if she had an accident? On the first day, Mikhaila trained on a real motorcycle. It was heavy. She dropped it several times. She saw another beginning rider tumble and roll across the parking lot where the course was held. On the morning of the second day of the course, she was afraid to return. She didn't want to leave her bed. We talked for a good while, and jointly decided that she should at least drive back with Tammy to the site where the training took place. If she couldn't manage it, she could stay in the car until the course finished. En route, her courage returned. When she received her certificate, everyone else enrolled stood and applauded.

Then her right ankle disintegrated. Her doctors wanted to fuse the large affected bones into one piece. But that would have caused the other, smaller bones in her foot—now facing additional pressure—to deteriorate. That's not so intolerable, perhaps, when you're eighty (although it's no picnic then either). But it's no solution when you're in your teens. We insisted upon an artificial replacement, although the technology was new. There was a three year-waiting list. This was simply not manageable. The damaged ankle produced much more pain than her previously failing hip. One bad night she became erratic and illogical. I couldn't calm her down. I knew she was at her breaking point. To call that stressful is to say almost nothing.

We spent weeks and then months desperately investigating all sorts of replacement devices, trying to assess their suitability. We looked everywhere for quicker surgery: India, China, Spain, the UK, Costa Rica, Florida. We contacted the Ontario Provincial Ministry of Health. They were very helpful. They located a specialist across the country, in Vancouver. Mikhaila's ankle was replaced in November. Post-surgery, she was in absolute agony. Her foot was mispositioned. The cast was compressing skin against bone. The clinic was unwilling to give her enough oxycontin to control her pain. She had built up a high level of tolerance because of her previous use.

When she returned home, in less pain, Mikhaila started to taper off the opiates. She hated oxycontin, despite its evident utility. She said it turned her life grey. Perhaps that was a good thing, under the circumstances. She stopped using it as soon as possible. She suffered through withdrawal for

months, with night sweating and formication (the sensation of ants crawling upside down under her skin). She became unable to experience any pleasure. That was another effect of opiate withdrawal.

During much of this period, we were overwhelmed. The demands of everyday life don't stop, just because you have been laid low by a catastrophe. Everything that you always do still has to be done. So how do you manage? Here are some things we learned:

Set aside some time to talk and to think about the illness or other crisis and how it should be managed every day. *Do not* talk or think about it otherwise. If you do not limit its effect, you will become exhausted, and everything will spiral into the ground. This is not helpful. Conserve your strength. You're in a war, not a battle, and a war is composed of many battles. You must stay functional through all of them. When worries associated with the crisis arise at other times, remind yourself that you will think them through, during the scheduled period. This usually works. The parts of your brain that generate anxiety are more interested in the fact that there is a plan than in the details of the plan. Don't schedule your time to think in the evening or at night. Then you won't be able to sleep. If you can't sleep, then everything will go rapidly downhill.

Shift the unit of time you use to frame your life. When the sun is shining, and times are good, and the crops are bountiful, you can make your plans for the next month, and the next year, and the next five years. You can even dream a decade ahead. But you can't do that when your leg is clamped firmly in a crocodile's jaws. "Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof"—that is Matthew 6:34. It is often interpreted as "live in the present, without a care for tomorrow." This is not what it means. That injunction must be interpreted in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, of which it is an integral part. That sermon distills the ten "Thou-shalt-nots" of the Commandments of Moses into a single prescriptive "Thou shalt." Christ enjoins His followers to place faith in God's Heavenly Kingdom, and the truth. That's a conscious decision to presume the primary goodness of Being. That's an act of courage. Aim high, like Pinocchio's Geppetto. Wish upon a star, and then act properly, in accordance with that aim. Once you are aligned with the heavens, you can concentrate on the day. Be careful. Put the things you can control in order. Repair what is in disorder, and make what is already good better. It is possible that you can manage, if you are careful. People are very tough.

People can survive through much pain and loss. But to persevere they must see the good in Being. If they lose that, they are truly lost.

Dogs, Again—But Finally, Cats

Dogs are like people. They are the friends and allies of human beings. They are social, hierarchical, and domesticated. They are happy at the bottom of the family pyramid. They pay for the attention they receive with loyalty, admiration, and love. Dogs are great.

Cats, however, are their own creatures. They aren't social or hierarchical (except in passing). They are only semi-domesticated. They don't do tricks. They are friendly on their own terms. Dogs have been tamed, but cats have made a decision. They appear willing to interact with people, for some strange reasons of their own. To me, cats are a manifestation of nature, of Being, in an almost pure form. Furthermore, they are a form of Being that looks at human beings and approves.

When you meet a cat on a street, many things can happen. If I see a cat at a distance, for example, the evil part of me wants to startle it with a loud pfft! sound—front teeth over bottom lip. That will make a nervous cat puff up its fur and stand sideways so it looks larger. Maybe I shouldn't laugh at cats, but it's hard to resist. The fact that they can be startled is one of the best things about them (along with the fact that they are instantly disgruntled and embarrassed by their overreaction). But when I have myself under proper control, I'll bend down, and call the cat over, so I can pet it. Sometimes, it will run away. Sometimes, it will ignore me completely, because it's a cat. But sometimes the cat will come over to me, push its head against my waiting hand, and be pleased about it. Sometimes it will even roll over, and arch its back against the dusty concrete (although cats positioned in that manner will often bite and claw even a friendly hand).

Across the street on which I live is a cat named Ginger. Ginger is a Siamese, a beautiful cat, very calm and self-possessed. She is low in the Big Five personality trait of neuroticism, which is an index of anxiety, fear and emotional pain. Ginger is not at all bothered by dogs. Our dog, Sikko, is her friend. Sometimes when you call her—sometimes of her own accord—Ginger will trot across the street, tail held high, with a little kink at the end. Then she will roll on her back in front of Sikko, who wags his tail happily as

a consequence. Afterward, if she feels like it, she might come visit you, for a half a minute. It's a nice break. It's a little extra light, on a good day, and a tiny respite, on a bad day.

If you pay careful attention, even on a bad day, you may be fortunate enough to be confronted with small opportunities of just that sort. Maybe you will see a little girl dancing on the street because she is all dressed up in a ballet costume. Maybe you will have a particularly good cup of coffee in a café that cares about their customers. Maybe you can steal ten or twenty minutes to do some little ridiculous thing that distracts you or reminds you that you can laugh at the absurdity of existence. Personally, I like to watch a *Simpsons* episode at 1.5 times regular speed: all the laughs; two-thirds the time.

And maybe when you are going for a walk and your head is spinning a cat will show up and if you pay attention to it then you will get a reminder for just fifteen seconds that the wonder of Being might make up for the ineradicable suffering that accompanies it.

Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.

P.S. Soon after I wrote this chapter, Mikhaila's surgeon told her that her artificial ankle would have to be removed, and her ankle fused. Amputation waited down that road. She had been in pain for eight years, since the replacement surgery, and her mobility remained significantly impaired, although both were much better than before. Four days later she happened upon a new physiotherapist. He was a large, powerful, attentive person. He had specialized in ankle treatment in the UK, in London. He placed his hands around her ankle and compressed it for forty seconds, while Mikhaila moved her foot back and forth. A mispositioned bone slipped back where it belonged. Her pain disappeared. She never cries in front of medical personnel, but she burst into tears. Her knee straightened up. Now she can walk long distances, and traipse around in her bare feet. The calf muscle on her damaged leg is growing back. She has much more flexion in the artificial joint. This year, she got married and had a baby girl, Elizabeth, named after my wife's departed mother.

Things are good.

For now.

Coda

WHAT SHALL I DO WITH MY NEWFOUND PEN OF LIGHT?

In late 2016 I travelled to northern California to meet a friend and business associate. We spent an evening together thinking and talking. At one point he took a pen from his jacket and took a few notes. It was LED-equipped and beamed light out its tip, so that writing in the dark was made easier. "Just another gadget," I thought. Later, however, in a more metaphorical frame of mind, I was struck quite deeply by the idea of a pen of light. There was something symbolic about it, something metaphysical. We're all in the dark, after all, much of the time. We could all use something written with light to guide us along our way. I told him I wanted to do some writing, while we sat and conversed, and I asked him if he would give me the pen, as a gift. When he handed it over, I found myself inordinately pleased. Now I could write illuminated words in the darkness! Obviously, it was important to do such a thing properly. So I said to myself, in all seriousness, "What shall I do with my newfound pen of light?" There are two verses in the New Testament that pertain to such things. I've thought about them a lot:

> Ask, and it shall given to you; Seek, and ye shall find; Knock, and it shall be open unto you: For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened (Matthew 7:7-7:8)

At first glance, this seems like nothing but a testament to the magic of prayer, in the sense of entreating God to grant favours. But God, whatever or whoever He may be, is no simple granter of wishes. When tempted by the Devil himself, in the desert—as we saw in Rule 7 (Pursue what is meaningful [not what is expedient])—even Christ Himself was not willing to call upon his Father for a favour; furthermore, every day, the prayers of desperate people go unanswered. But maybe this is because the questions they contain are not phrased in the proper manner. Perhaps it's not reasonable to ask God to break the rules of physics every time we fall by the wayside or make a serious error. Perhaps, in such times, you can't put the cart before the horse

and simply wish for your problem to be solved in some magical manner. Perhaps you could ask, instead, what you might have to do right now to increase your resolve, buttress your character, and find the strength to go on. Perhaps you could instead ask to see the truth.

On many occasions in our nearly thirty years of marriage my wife and I have had a disagreement—sometimes a deep disagreement. Our unity appeared to be broken, at some unknowably profound level, and we were not able to easily resolve the rupture by talking. We became trapped, instead, in emotional, angry and anxious argument. We agreed that when such circumstances arose we would separate, briefly: she to one room, me to another. This was often quite difficult, because it is hard to disengage in the heat of an argument, when anger generates the desire to defeat and win. But it seemed better than risking the consequences of a dispute that threatened to spiral out of control.

Alone, trying to calm down, we would each ask ourselves the same single question: *What had we each done to contribute to the situation we were arguing about? However small, however distant … we had each made some error*. Then we would reunite, and share the results of our questioning: *Here's how I was wrong ….*

The problem with asking yourself such a question is that you must truly want the answer. And the problem with doing that is that *you won't like the answer*. When you are arguing with someone, you want to be right, and you want the other person to be wrong. Then it's them that has to sacrifice something and change, not you, and that's much preferable. If it's you that's wrong and you that must change, then you have to reconsider yourself—your memories of the past, your manner of being in the present, and your plans for the future. Then you must resolve to improve and figure out how to do that. Then you actually have to do it. That's exhausting. It takes repeated practice, to instantiate the new perceptions and make the new actions habitual. It's much easier just not to realize, admit and engage. It's much easier to turn your attention away from the truth and remain wilfully blind.

But it's at such a point that you must decide whether you want to be right or you want to have peace.[216] You must decide whether to insist upon the absolute correctness of your view, or to listen and negotiate. You don't get peace by being right. You just get to be right, while your partner gets to be

wrong—defeated and wrong. Do that ten thousand times and your marriage will be over (or you will wish it was). To choose the alternative—to seek peace—you have to decide that you want the answer, more than you want to be right. That's the way out of the prison of your stubborn preconceptions. That's the prerequisite for negotiation. That's to truly abide by principle of Rule 2 (Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping).

My wife and I learned that if you ask yourself such a question, and you genuinely desire the answer (no matter how disgraceful and terrible and shameful), then a memory of something you did that was stupid and wrong at some point in the generally not-distant-enough past will arise from the depths of your mind. Then you can go back to your partner and reveal why you're an idiot, and apologize (sincerely) and that person can do the same for you, and then apologize (sincerely), and then you two idiots will be able to talk again. Perhaps that is true prayer: the question, "What have I done wrong, and what can I do now to set things at least a little bit more right?" But your heart must be open to the terrible truth. You must be receptive to that which you do not want to hear. When you decide to learn about your faults, so that they can be rectified, you open a line of communication with the source of all revelatory thought. Maybe that's the same thing as consulting your conscience. Maybe that's the same thing, in some manner, as a discussion with God.

It was in that spirit, with some paper in front of me, that I asked my question: *What shall I do with my newfound pen of light?* I asked, as if I truly wanted the answer. I waited for a reply. I was holding a conversation between two different elements of myself. I was genuinely thinking—or listening, in the sense described in Rule 9 (Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't). That rule can apply as much to yourself as to others. It was me, of course, who asked the question—and it was me, of course, who replied. But those two me's were not the same. I did not know what the answer would be. I was waiting for it to appear in the theatre of my imagination. I was waiting for the words to spring out of the void. How can a person think up something that surprises him? How can he already not know what he thinks? Where do new thoughts come from? Who or what thinks them?

Since I had just been given, of all things, a Pen of Light, which could write Illuminated Words in the darkness, I wanted to do the best thing I could with it. So, I asked the appropriate question—and, almost immediately, an answer

revealed itself: *Write down the words you want inscribed on your soul.* I wrote that down. That seemed pretty good—a little on the romantic side, granted—but that was in keeping with the game. Then I upped the ante. I decided to ask myself the hardest questions I could think up, and await their answers. If you have a Pen of Light, after all, you should use it to answer Difficult Questions. Here was the first: *What shall I do tomorrow?* The answer came: *The most good possible in the shortest period of time.* That was satisfying, as well—conjoining an ambitious aim with the demands of maximal efficiency. A worthy challenge. The second question was in the same vein: *What shall I do next year? Try to ensure that the good I do then will be exceeded only by the good I do the year after that.* That seemed solid, too—a nice extension of the ambitions detailed in the previous answer. I told my friend that I was trying a serious experiment in writing with the pen he had given to me. I asked if I could read aloud what I had composed so far. The questions—and the answers—struck a chord with him, too. That was good. That was impetus to continue.

The next question ended the first set: *What shall I do with my life? Aim for Paradise, and concentrate on today.* Hah! I knew what that meant. It's what Geppetto does in the Disney movie *Pinocchio,* when he wishes upon a star. The grandfatherly woodcarver lifts up his eyes to the twinkling diamond set high above the mundane world of day-to-day human concerns and articulates his deepest desire: that the marionette he created lose the strings by which he is manipulated by others and transform himself into a real boy. It's also the central message of the Sermon on the Mount, as we saw in Rule 4 (Compare yourself to who you were yesterday …), but which deserve repeating here:

> And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:28-6:33).

What does all that mean? Orient yourself properly. Then—and only then—concentrate on the day. Set your sights at the Good, the Beautiful, and the True, and then focus pointedly and carefully on the concerns of each moment. Aim continually at Heaven while you work diligently on Earth.

Attend fully to the future, in that manner, while attending fully to the present. Then you have the best chance of perfecting both.

I turned, then, from the use of time to my relationships with people, and wrote down and then read these questions and answers to my friend: *What shall I do with my wife? Treat her as if she is the Holy Mother of God, so that she may give birth to the world-redeeming hero. What shall I do with my daughter? Stand behind her, listen to her, guard her, train her mind, and let her know it's OK if she wants to be a mother. What shall I do with my parents? Act such that your actions justify the suffering they endured. What shall I do with my son? Encourage him to be a true Son of God.*

To honour your wife as a Mother of God is to notice and support the sacred element of her role as mother (not just of your children, but as such). A society that forgets this cannot survive. Hitler's mother gave birth to Hitler, and Stalin's mother to Stalin. Was something amiss in their crucial relationships? It seems likely, given the importance of the maternal role in establishing trust[217]—to take a single vital example. Perhaps the importance of their motherly duties, and of their relationship with their children, was not properly stressed; perhaps what the women were doing in their maternal guise was not properly regarded by husband, father and society alike. Who instead might a woman produce if she was treated properly, honourably and carefully? After all, the fate of the world rests on each new infant—tiny, fragile and threatened but, in time, capable of uttering the words and doing the deeds that maintain the eternal, delicate balance between chaos and order.

To stand behind my daughter? That's to encourage her, in everything she wants courageously to do, but to include in that genuine appreciation for the fact of her femininity: to recognize the importance of having a family and children and to forego the temptation to denigrate or devalue that in comparison to accomplishment of personal ambition or career. It's not for nothing that the Holy Mother and Infant is a divine image—as we just discussed. Societies that cease to honour that image—that cease to see that relationship as of transcendent and fundamental importance—also cease to be.

To act to justify the suffering of your parents is to remember all the sacrifices that all the others who lived before you (not least your parents) have made for you in all the course of the terrible past, to be grateful for all

the progress that has been thereby made, and then to act in accordance with that remembrance and gratitude. People sacrificed immensely to bring about what we have now. In many cases, they literally died for it—and we should act with some respect for that fact.

To encourage my son to be a true Son of God? That is to want him above all *to do what is right,* and to strive to have his back while he is doing so. That is, I think, part of the sacrificial message: to value and support your son's commitment to transcendent good above all things (including his worldly progress, so to speak, and his safety—and, perhaps, even his life).

I continued asking questions. The answers came within seconds. *What shall I do with the stranger? Invite him into my house, and treat him like a brother, so that he may become one.* That's to extend the hand of trust to someone so that his or her best part can step forward and reciprocate. That's to manifest the sacred hospitality that makes life between those who do not yet know each other possible. *What shall I do with a fallen soul? Offer a genuine and cautious hand, but do not join it in the mire.* That's a good summary of what we covered in Rule 3 (Make friends with people who want the best for you). That's an injunction to refrain both from casting pearls before swine, and from camouflaging your vice with virtue. *What shall I do with the world? Conduct myself as if Being is more valuable than Non-Being.* Act so that you are not made bitter and corrupt by the tragedy of existence. That's the essence of Rule 1 (Stand up straight with your shoulders back): confront the uncertainty of the world voluntarily, and with faith and courage.

How shall I educate my people? Share with them those things I regard as truly important. That's Rule 8 (Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie). That is to aim for wisdom, to distill that wisdom into words, and to speak forth those words as if they matter, with true concern and care. That's all relevant, as well, to the next question (and answer): *What shall I do with a torn nation? Stitch it back together with careful words of truth.* The importance of this injunction has, if anything, become clearer over the past few years: we are dividing, and polarizing, and drifting toward chaos. It is necessary, under such conditions, if we are to avoid catastrophe, for each of us to bring forward the truth, as we see it: not the arguments that justify our ideologies, not the machinations that further our ambitions, but the stark pure facts of our existence, revealed for others to see and contemplate, so that we can find common ground and proceed together.

What shall I do for God my Father? Sacrifice everything I hold dear to yet greater perfection. Let the deadwood burn off, so that new growth can prevail. That's the terrible lesson of Cain and Abel, detailed in the discussion of meaning surrounding Rule 7. *What shall I do with a lying man? Let him speak so that he may reveal himself.* Rule 9 (Listen …) is once again relevant here, as is another section of the New Testament:

> Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:16-7:20).

The rot must be revealed before something sound can be put in its place, as was also indicated in Rule 7's elaboration—and all of this is pertinent to understanding the following question and answer: *How shall I deal with the enlightened one? Replace him with the true seeker of enlightenment.* There is no enlightened one. There is only the one who is seeking further enlightenment. Proper Being is process, not a state; a journey, not a destination. It's the continual transformation of what you know, through encounter with what you don't know, rather than the desperate clinging to the certainty that is eternally insufficient in any case. That accounts for the importance of Rule 4 (Compare yourself …). Always place your becoming above your current being. That means it is necessary to recognize and accept your insufficiency, so that it can be continually rectified. That's painful, certainly—but it's a good deal.

The next few Q & A's made another coherent group, focused this time on ingratitude: *What shall I do when I despise what I have? Remember those who have nothing and strive to be grateful.* Take stock of what is right in front of you. Consider Rule 12—somewhat tongue-in-cheek—(Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street). Consider, as well, that you may be blocked in your progress not because you lack opportunity, but because you have been too arrogant to make full use of what already lies in front of you. That's Rule 6 (Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world).

I spoke recently with a young man about such things. He had barely ever left his family and never his home state—but he journeyed to Toronto to attend one of my lectures and to meet with me at my home. He had isolated himself far too severely in the short course of his life to date and was badly

plagued by anxiety. When we first met, he could hardly speak. He had nonetheless determined in the last year to do something about all of that. He started by taking on the lowly job of dishwasher. He decided to do it well, when he could have treated it contemptuously. Intelligent enough to be embittered by a world that did not recognize his gifts, he decided instead to accept with the genuine humility that is the true precursor to wisdom whatever opportunity he could find. Now he lives on his own. That's better than living at home. Now he has some money. Not much. But more than none. And he earned it. Now he is confronting the social world, and benefitting from the ensuing conflict:

> *Knowledge frequently results*
> *from knowing others,*
> *but the man who is awakened,*
> *has seen the uncarved block.*
> *Others might be mastered by force,*
> *but to master one's self*
> *requires the Tao.*
> *He who has many material things,*
> *may be described as rich,*
> *but he who knows he has enough,*
> *and is at one with the Tao,*
> *might have enough of material things*
> *and have self-being as well.*[218]

As long as my still-anxious but self-transforming and determined visitor continues down his current path, he will become far more competent and accomplished, and it won't take long. But this will only be because he accepted his lowly state and was sufficiently grateful to take the first equally lowly step away from it. That's far preferable to waiting, endlessly, for the magical arrival of Godot. That's far preferable to arrogant, static, unchanging existence, while the demons of rage, resentment and unlived life gather around.

What shall I do when greed consumes me? Remember that it is truly better to give than to receive. The world is a forum of sharing and trading (that's Rule 7, again), not a treasure-house for the plundering. To give is to do what you can to make things better. The good in people will respond to that, and support it, and imitate it, and multiply it, and return it, and foster it, so that everything improves and moves forward.

What shall I do when I ruin my rivers? Seek for the living water and let it cleanse the Earth. I found this question, as well as its answer, particularly unexpected. It seems most associated with Rule 6 (Set your house …). Perhaps our environmental problems are not best construed technically. Maybe they're best considered psychologically. The more people sort themselves out, the more responsibility they will take for the world around them and the more problems they will solve.[219] It is better, proverbially, to rule your own spirit than to rule a city. It's easier to subdue an enemy without than one within. Maybe the environmental problem is ultimately spiritual. If we put ourselves in order, perhaps we will do the same for the world. Of course, what else would a psychologist think?

The next set were associated with proper response to crisis and exhaustion:

What shall I do when my enemy succeeds? Aim a little higher and be grateful for the lesson. Back to Matthew: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven" (5:43-5:45). What does this mean? Learn, from the success of your enemies; listen (Rule 9) to their critique, so that you can glean from their opposition whatever fragments of wisdom you might incorporate, to your betterment; adopt as your ambition the creation of a world in which those who work against you see the light and wake up and succeed, so that the better at which you are aiming can encompass them, too.

What shall I do when I'm tired and impatient? Gratefully accept an outstretched helping hand. This is something with a twofold meaning. It's an injunction, first, to note the reality of the limitations of individual being and, second, to accept and be thankful for the support of others—family, friends, acquaintances and strangers alike. Exhaustion and impatience are inevitable. There is too much to be done and too little time in which to do it. But we don't have to strive alone, and there is nothing but good in distributing the responsibilities, cooperating in the efforts, and sharing credit for the productive and meaningful work thereby undertaken.

What shall I do with the fact of aging? Replace the potential of my youth with the accomplishments of my maturity. This hearkens back to the

discussion of friendship surrounding Rule 3, and the story of Socrates' trial and death—which might be summarized, as follows: *A life lived thoroughly justifies its own limitations*. The young man with nothing has his possibilities to set against the accomplishments of his elders. It's not clear that it's necessarily a bad deal, for either. "An aged man is but a paltry thing," wrote William Butler Yeats, "A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress …."[220]

What shall I do with my infant's death? Hold my other loved ones and heal their pain. It is necessary to be strong in the face of death, because death is intrinsic to life. It is for this reason that I tell my students: aim to be the person at your father's funeral that everyone, in their grief and misery, can rely on. There's a worthy and noble ambition: strength in the face of adversity. That is very different from the wish for a life free of trouble.

What shall I do in the next dire moment? Focus my attention on the next right move. The flood is coming. The flood is always coming. The apocalypse is always upon us. That's why the story of Noah is archetypal. Things fall apart—we stressed that in the discussion surrounding Rule 10 (Be precise in your speech)—and the centre cannot hold. When everything has become chaotic and uncertain, all that remains to guide you might be the character you constructed, previously, by aiming up and concentrating on the moment at hand. If you have failed in that, you will fail in the moment of crisis, and then God help you.

That last set contained what I thought were the most difficult of all the questions I asked that night. The death of a child is, perhaps, the worst of catastrophes. Many relationships fail in the aftermath of such a tragedy. But dissolution in the face of such horror is not inevitable, although it is understandable. I have seen people immensely strengthen their remaining family bonds when someone close to them has died. I have seen them turn to those who remained and redouble their efforts to connect with them and support them. Because of that, all regained at least some of what had been so terribly torn away by death. We must therefore commiserate in our grief. We must come together in the face of the tragedy of existence. Our families can be the living room with the fireplace that is cozy and welcoming and warm while the storms of winter rage outside.

The heightened knowledge of fragility and mortality produced by death can terrify, embitter and separate. It can also awaken. It can remind those who grieve not to take the people who love them for granted. Once I did some chilling calculations regarding my parents, who are in their eighties. It was an example of the hated arithmetic we encountered in the discussion of Rule 5 (Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them)—and I walked through the equations so that I would stay properly conscious. I see my Mom and Dad about twice a year. We generally spend several weeks together. We talk on the phone in the interim between visits. But the life expectancy of people in their eighties is under ten years. That means I am likely to see my parents, if I am fortunate, fewer than twenty more times. That's a terrible thing to know. But knowing it puts a stop to my taking those opportunities for granted.

The next set of questions—and answers—had to do with the development of character. *What shall I say to a faithless brother? The King of the Damned is a poor judge of Being*. It is my firm belief that the best way to fix the world—a handyman's dream, if ever there was one—is to fix yourself, as we discussed in Rule 6. Anything else is presumptuous. Anything else risks harm, stemming from your ignorance and lack of skill. But that's OK. There's plenty to do, right where you are. After all, your specific personal faults detrimentally affect the world. Your conscious, voluntary sins (because no other word really works) makes things worse than they have to be. Your inaction, inertia and cynicism removes from the world that part of you that could learn to quell suffering and make peace. That's not good. There are endless reasons to despair of the world, and to become angry and resentful and to seek revenge.

Failure to make the proper sacrifices, failure to reveal yourself, failure to live and tell the truth—all that weakens you. In that weakened state, you will be unable to thrive in the world, and you will be of no benefit to yourself or to others. You will fail and suffer, stupidly. That will corrupt your soul. How could it be otherwise? Life is hard enough when it is going well. But when it's going badly? And I have learned through painful experience that nothing is going so badly that it can't be made worse. This is why Hell is a bottomless pit. This is why Hell is associated with that aforementioned sin. In the most awful of cases, the terrible suffering of unfortunate souls becomes attributable, by their own judgment, to mistakes they made knowingly in the

past: acts of betrayal, deception, cruelty, carelessness, cowardice and, most commonly of all, willful blindness. To suffer terribly and to know yourself as the cause: that is Hell. And once in Hell it is very easy to curse Being itself. And no wonder. But it's not justifiable. *And that's why the King of the Damned is a poor judge of Being*.

How do you build yourself into someone on whom you can rely, in the best of times and the worst—in peace and in war? How do you build for yourself the kind of character that will not ally itself, in its suffering and misery, with all who dwell in Hell? The questions and answers continued, all pertinent, in one way or another, to the rules I have outlined in this book:

What shall I do to strengthen my spirit? Do not tell lies, or do what you despise.

What shall I do to ennoble my body? Use it only in the service of my soul.

What shall I do with the most difficult of questions? Consider them the gateway to the path of life.

What shall I do with the poor man's plight? Strive through right example to lift his broken heart.

What shall I do when the great crowd beckons? Stand tall and utter my broken truths.

And that was that. I still have my Pen of Light. I haven't written anything with it since. Maybe I will again when the mood strikes and something wells up from deep below. But, even if I don't, it helped me find the words to properly close this book.

I hope that my writing has proved useful to you. I hope it revealed things you knew that you did not know you knew. I hope the ancient wisdom I discussed provides you with strength. I hope it brightened the spark within you. I hope you can straighten up, sort out your family, and bring peace and prosperity to your community. I hope, in accordance with Rule 11 (Do not bother children when they are skateboarding), that you strengthen and encourage those who are committed to your care instead of protecting them to the point of weakness.

I wish you all the best, and hope that you can wish the best for others.

What will you write with your pen of light?

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FOREWORD

fn1 Some argue—mistakenly—that Freud (often mentioned in these pages) contributed to our current longing for a culture, schools and institutions that are "non-judgmental." It is true that he recommended that when psychoanalysts listen to their patients in therapy, they be tolerant, empathic, and not voice critical, moralistic judgments. But this was for the express purposes of helping patients feel comfortable in being totally honest, and not diminish their problems. This encouraged self-reflection, and allowed them to explore warded off feelings, wishes, even shameful anti-social urges. It also—and this was the masterstroke—allowed them to discover their own unconscious conscience (and its judgments), and their own harsh self-criticism of their "lapses," and their own unconscious guilt which they had often hidden from themselves, but which often formed the basis of their low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. If anything, Freud showed that we are both more immoral and more moral than we are aware of. This kind of "non-judgmentalism," *in therapy*, is a powerful and liberating technique or tactic—an ideal attitude when you want to better understand yourself. But Freud never argued (as do some who want all culture to become one huge group therapy session) that one can live one's *entire life* without *ever* making judgments, or without morality. In fact, his point in *Civilization and its Discontents* is that civilization only arises when some restraining rules and morality are in place.

OVERTURE

fn1 The yin/yang symbol is the second part of the more comprehensive five-part *tajitu*, a diagram representing both the original absolute unity and its division into the multiplicity of the observed world. This is discussed in more detail in Rule 2, below, as well as elsewhere in the book.

fn2 I use the term Being (with a capital "B") in part because of my exposure to the ideas of the 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger tried to distinguish between reality, as conceived objectively, and the totality of human experience (which is his "Being"). Being (with a capital "B") is what each of us experiences, subjectively, personally and individually, as well as what we each experience jointly with others. As such, it includes emotions, drives, dreams, visions and revelations, as well as our private thoughts and perceptions. Being is also, finally, something that is brought into existence by action, so its nature is to an indeterminate degree a consequence of our decisions and choices—something shaped by our hypothetically free will. Construed in this manner, Being is (1) not something easily and directly reducible to the material and objective and (2) something that most definitely requires its own term, as Heidegger labored for decades to indicate.

RULE 2: TREAT YOURSELF LIKE SOMEONE YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING

fn1 It is of great interest, in this regard, that the five-part *taijitu* (referred to in Chapter 1 and the source of the simpler yin/yang symbol) expresses the origin of the cosmos as, first, originating in the undifferentiated absolute, then dividing into yin and yang (chaos/order, feminine/masculine), and then into the five agents (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and then, simply put, "the ten thousand things." The Star of David (chaos/order, feminine/masculine) gives rise in the same way to the four basic elements: fire, air, water and earth (out of which everything else is built). A similar hexagram is used by the Hindus. The downward triangle symbolizes Shakti, the feminine; the upward triangle, Shiva, the masculine. The two components are known as *om* and *hrim* in Sanskrit. Remarkable examples of conceptual parallelism.

fn2 Or, in another interpretation, He split the original androgynous individual into two parts, male and female. According to this line of thinking, Christ, the "second Adam," is also the original Man, before the sexual subdivision. The symbolic meaning of this should be clear to those who have followed the argument thus far.

RULE 5: DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN DO ANYTHING THAT MAKES YOU DISLIKE THEM

fn1 I draw here and will many times again in the course of this book on my clinical experience (as I have, already, on my personal history). I have tried to keep the moral of the stories intact, while disguising the details for the sake of the privacy of those involved. I hope I got the balance right.

RULE 7: PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

fn1 And this is all true, note, whether there is—or is not—*actually* such a powerful figure, "in the sky" :)

fn2 In keeping with this observation is the fact that the word Set is an etymological precursor to the word Satan. See Murdock, D.M. (2009). *Christ in Egypt: the Horus-Jesus connection*. Seattle, WA: Stellar House, p. 75.

fn3 For anyone who thinks this is somehow unrealistic, given the concrete material reality and genuine suffering that is associated with privation, I would once again recommend Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which contains a series of exceptionally

profound discussions about proper ethical behavior and its exaggerated rather than diminished importance in situations of extreme want and suffering.

RULE 9: ASSUME THAT THE PERSON YOU ARE LISTENING TO MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T

fn1 Here, again, I have disguised many of the details of this case, to maintain the privacy of those involved, while attempting to maintain the central meaning of the events.

fn2 The strategy of speaking to individuals is not only vital to the delivery of any message, it's a useful antidote to fear of public speaking. No one wants to be stared at by hundreds of unfriendly, judgmental eyes. However, almost everybody can talk to just one attentive person. So, if you have to deliver a speech (another terrible phrase) then do that. Talk to the individuals in the audience—and don't hide: not behind the podium, not with downcast eyes, not by speaking too quietly or mumbling, not by apologizing for your lack of brilliance or preparedness, not behind ideas that are not yours, and not behind clichés.

RULE 10: BE PRECISE IN YOUR SPEECH

fn1 This is why, for example, it has taken us far longer than we originally assumed to make robots that could function autonomously in the world. The problem of perception is far more difficult than our immediate effortless access to our own perceptions predisposes us to infer. In fact, the problem of perception is so difficult that it stalled the early progress of artificial intelligence almost fatally (from the perspective of that time), as we discovered that disembodied abstract reason could not solve even simple real-world problems. Pioneers such as Rodney Brooks proposed in the late 1980s and early '90s that bodies in action were necessary preconditions to the parsing of the world into manageable things, and the AI revolution regained its confidence and momentum.

fn2 The recording is available at Peterson, J.B. (2002). Slaying the Dragon Within Us. Lecture, originally broadcast by TVO: available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REjUkEj1O_0

RULE 11: DO NOT BOTHER CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE SKATEBOARDING

fn1 Names and other details have been changed for the sake of privacy.

fn2 37-28/28 = 9/28 = 32 percent.

fn3 35-29/35 = 6/35 = 17 percent.